



JOHN C. ENNIS III

• TALENT •
VERSATILITY • EXCELLENCE

by Mel Stewart Hankla

I FIRST MET JOHN ENNIS in 1983 at the Western Kentucky University Gunmaking Seminar in Bowling Green, Kentucky. This now famous annual event was the brainchild of Dr. Terry Leeper, Chairman of WKU's Department of Architectural & Manufacturing Sciences. Recognizing a local interest in traditional longrifle building and the connection to Kentucky's frontier history, Dr. Leeper decided to offer a summer session in which students could work toward building a longrifle. He enriched the class by inviting

noted guest instructors to come for a few days and share their expertise.

The first summer (1981) the instructors included Hershel House from nearby Woodbury, Kentucky, Wallace Gusler from Williamsburg, Virginia, John Bivins from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Lynton McKenzie from Tucson, Arizona. All were nationally known for their particular facet of the gunbuilding trade and all rather legendary for their expertise.

By 1983, interest in the Seminar had literally exploded with over 100 students



from across the nation signing up to take the two-week course. This made it necessary to add instructors Gary Brumfield from the Colonial Williamsburg Gunshop, Monte Mandarino from Kalispell, Montana, and Mark Silver from Chassell, Michigan, all who became integral components of the seminar throughout the following years.

Fall of 1982, I enrolled at WKU to work

Robert Weil

Right: In a dapper pose, John W. Ennis III looks like he just walked off the set of a Western movie, but he is dressed up in traditional style for "Cowboy Crossings", the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association and Cowboy Artist of America combined show and sale at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

Below: John is first on the left, top row, in this photo of the 1983 Western Kentucky University Gunmaking Seminar. This group is literally a "Who's Who" of today's contemporary rifle makers and is autographed by all the instructors, three of which are now deceased.



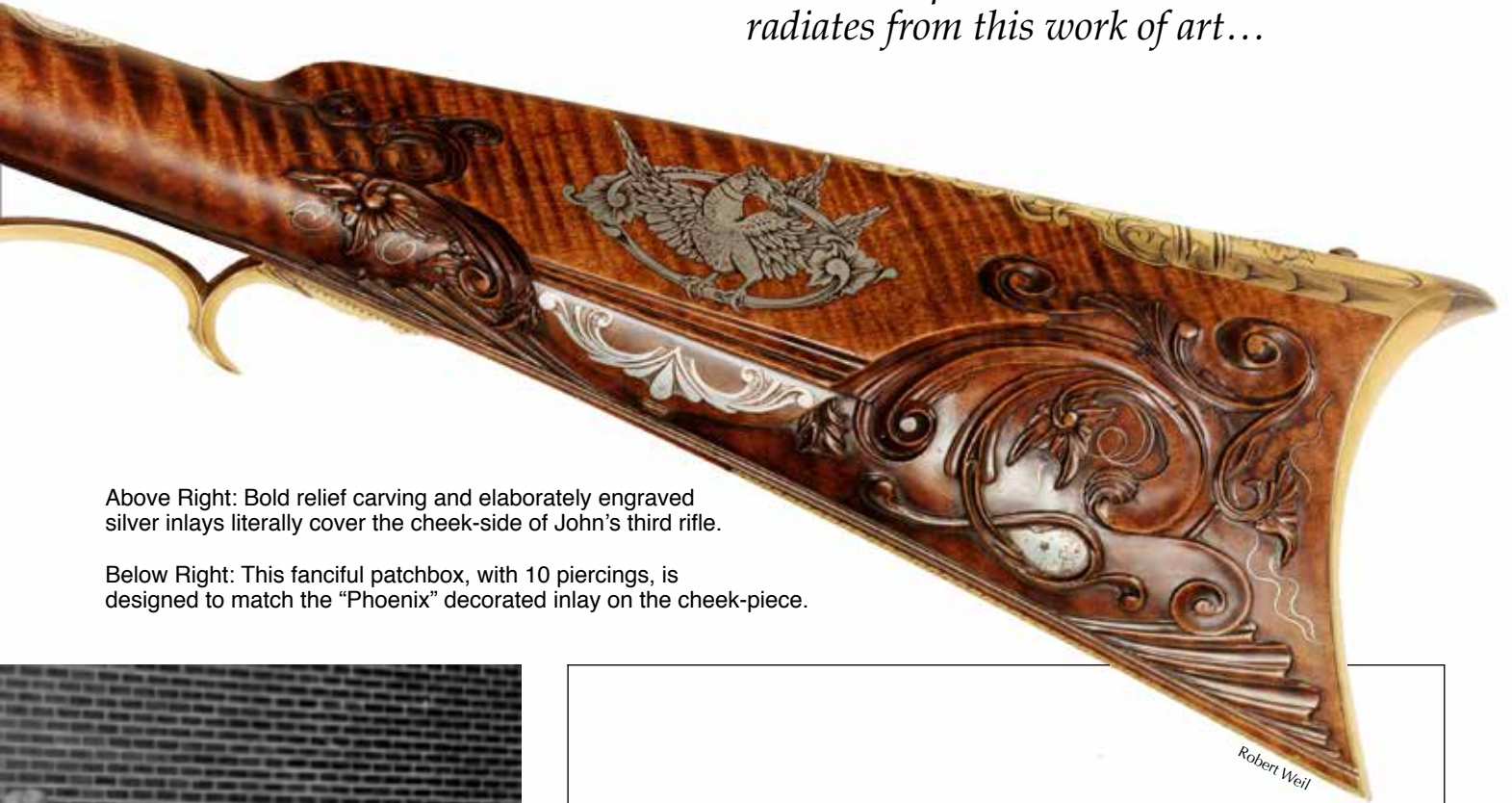
Joe & Gayla Ownbey

on a Master's Degree and soon learned of Dr. Leeper and his interest in the longrifle. He had just returned from a sabbatical spent at the gun shop at Colonial Williamsburg and was offering a class entitled, "Independent Investigations in Industrial Education." During this class, one would create a rifle "from the stick," making all the parts, except for the individual components of a lock and the barrel. This labor-intensive yearlong class started me on the path that I continue to follow today.

Lingering excitement from the experience of building my first rifle made me a shoe-in for the 1983 WKU Gunbuilding Seminar. I joined a group that included many of the noted gunbuilders in the Contemporary Longrifle culture today. Each of us were extremely excited and passionate about the American longrifle and hungry to know more about the intricacies of how they were made.



*Free-spirited Passion
radiates from this work of art...*



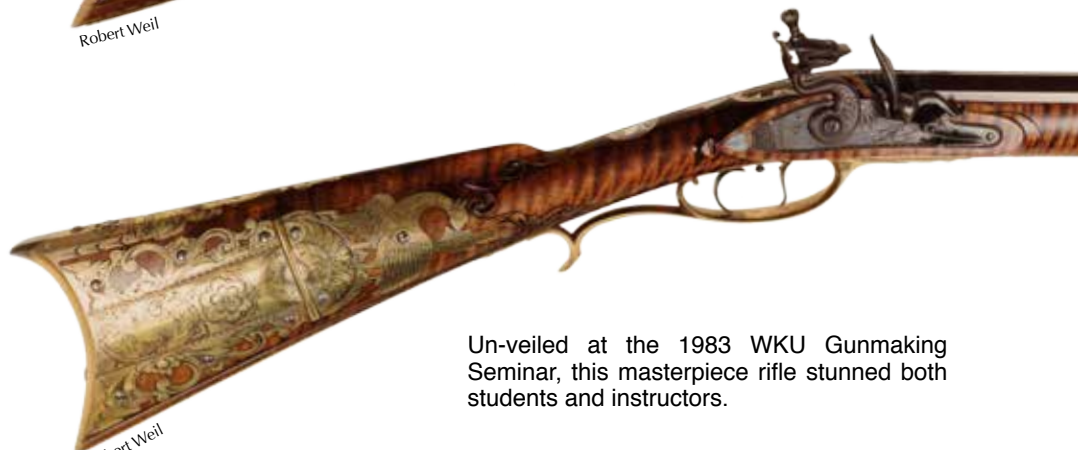
Above Right: Bold relief carving and elaborately engraved silver inlays literally cover the cheek-side of John's third rifle.

Below Right: This fanciful patchbox, with 10 piercings, is designed to match the "Phoenix" decorated inlay on the cheek-piece.



Robert Weil

Robert Weil



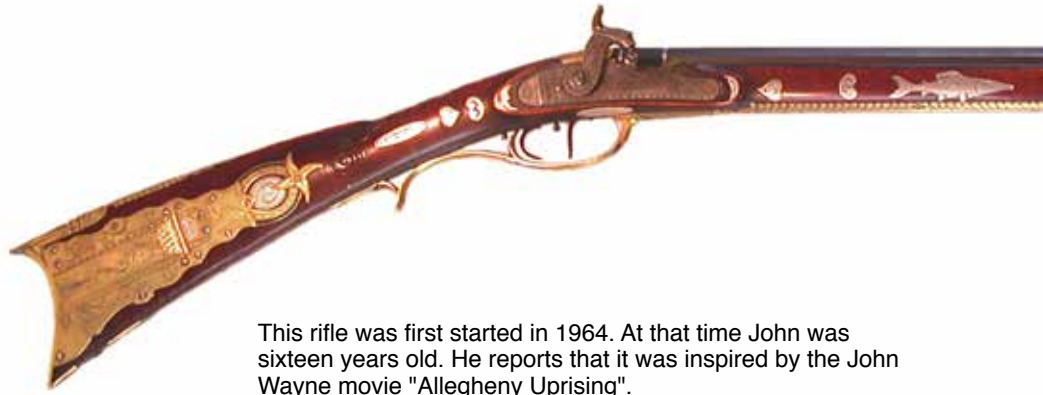
Robert Weil

Un-veiled at the 1983 WKU Gunmaking Seminar, this masterpiece rifle stunned both students and instructors.

Almost every student had brought along a rifle, more often than not a work in progress. Each eagerly awaited (not always patiently) an opportunity to proudly thrust it in the hands of one of the famous instructors in hopes of a favorable critique. I remember vividly John reaching into a heavily padded gun case and pulling out his "jewel like" rifle. The workmanship was breathtaking! Even being somewhat gaudy, the stunning artwork that literally covered its entire surface flowed with surprising success. Gingerly presenting it to a quizzical Hershel House, I'll never forget Hershel's comment as he rolled it over in his hands saying, "Damn, boy. Couldn't you think of anything else to put on this thing!" drawing nervous laughter from the gathering crowd.

As the other instructors gathered around, John announced that it was his third rifle! As it was carefully passed around for what seemed like hours, question after question was asked about his methods, his design, his inspiration; instructors and students alike realized they had just witnessed the unveiling of a masterpiece from an extremely talented self-taught artist.

John's rifle was indeed a masterpiece, however it was a free-spirited work of art; one that many of today's purists would disapprove of for its dramatically mixed regional styles. But I contend that many contemporary makers have allowed their creativity to be severely stifled by peer expectation. Volumes have been written about historic regional styles of early American rifles, and many contemporary makers strictly follow this norm. Many original rifles have become famous as "patterns" for contemporary projects and have greatly inspired modern makers. There



This rifle was first started in 1964. At that time John was sixteen years old. He reports that it was inspired by the John Wayne movie "Allegheny Uprising".



Dan Retting



Jamie Ennis

Above Right: After moving to Idaho from Semi Valley, California in 2005, John designed and hand drew this trade label that he uses today.

Below Right: In 2013 John added more inlays, additional carving, and additional engraving. He writes, "A lot of the silver inlay was in the style of B.J. Koughe out of the book "The Kentucky Rifle and Me" by Edith Cooper. I would like to reproduce a rifle similar to Koughe's rifle someday. At the time, the "Man in the Moon" motif seemed to fit my Kentucky rifle fantasies and I have always used hearts in my art work..."

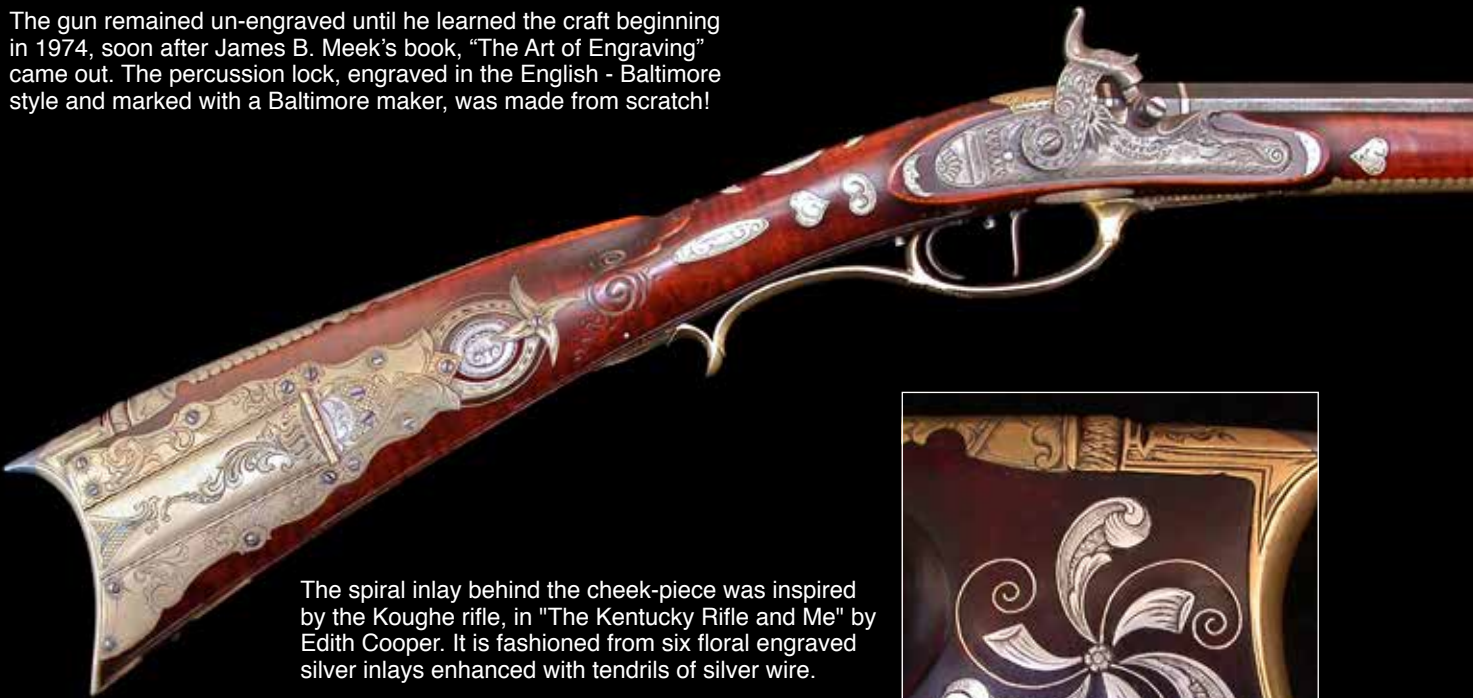


Jamie Ennis



Jamie Ennis

The gun remained un-engraved until he learned the craft beginning in 1974, soon after James B. Meek's book, "The Art of Engraving" came out. The percussion lock, engraved in the English - Baltimore style and marked with a Baltimore maker, was made from scratch!



The spiral inlay behind the cheek-piece was inspired by the Koughe rifle, in "The Kentucky Rifle and Me" by Edith Cooper. It is fashioned from six floral engraved silver inlays enhanced with tendrils of silver wire.



Jamie Ennis

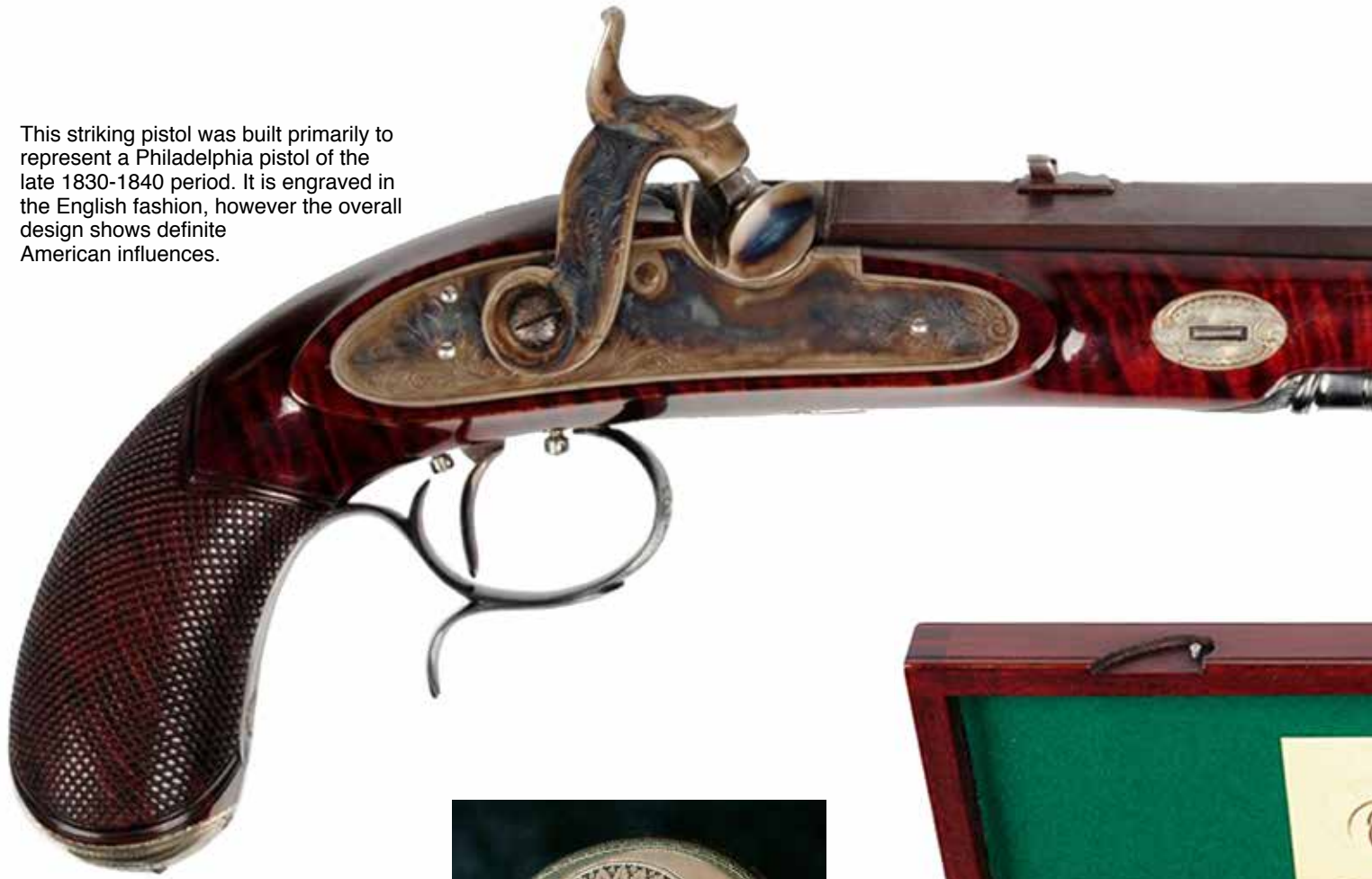
Jamie Ennis



John fashioned the trigger guard from solid stock. The lock bolt plate retains some of the first attempts that he made at engraving. The beaver tail cheek piece was a feature inspired from the rifle in "Allegheny Uprising".

Jamie Ennis

This striking pistol was built primarily to represent a Philadelphia pistol of the late 1830-1840 period. It is engraved in the English fashion, however the overall design shows definite American influences.



Right: The cap box found in the silver buttcap is made in the "Derringer" fashion. John stated, "making it was an absolute painful experience!"

Below: The brass lid inlay of the mahogany pistol case is formed and engraved with a pineapple finial, in the style of famous Philadelphia gunmaker, Jacob Kuntz.



Jamie Emms



Dan Retting





Dan Retting

The pistol is boxed in a traditional English fashion with traditional accessories. The flask was purchased, but John made the case and other accoutrements.



Dan Retting

are few rifles being built today that a well-read student cannot identify some specific detail borrowed from an original rifle. However, as research continues on the evolution of the Kentucky Rifle, many unique examples are being studied that do not follow these scholastic trends identified by Kaufmann, Kindig, Shumway and other early students. We are learning that as the rifle makers migrated south and west, stylistic details started to be mixed and mingled, with rifles being produced that just do not neatly fit into a labeled "school."

Michelangelo said, "Art is an idea," and today there are relatively few "new ideas" found on contemporary rifles. BUT... this is surely not so in the work of John Ennis. As you peruse these pages filled with examples of John's work, you will notice his faithful execution on the "documentary" pieces; but also notice that on the longrifles most all of the decorative designs have come from the belly of imagination. Many would call these "fantasy guns," a somewhat new term most often used in conjunction with very elaborate rifles. These works of art are a mix between "interpretation" and the "new school" classifications of contemporary rifles. They stand as proof that that the American Longrifle is still evolving. These so called fantasy guns are a continuum of an art form that goes back for generations and are artistic expressions built on architectural foundations laid long ago. They are contemporary: "of the present time; modern."

Since the creation of the Contemporary Longrifle Association in 1997, lots of "peer pressure" has developed and we must admit that much has been learned and shared about design and style. The annual meeting of the CLA in Lexington, Kentucky continues to provide an arena for makers to exhibit their wares. We humans are creatures of comparison and are admittedly our own worst critics; thus, by having the opportunity to compare one another's work on a yearly basis it is remarkable how the very existence of the organization has affected the growth in quality of this uniquely American art form. It would have been ingenious if in the beginning someone would have had the insight to devise a way to measure the increase in quality of the varied historical art forms that are proudly shown each year. The knowledge gained from

This large English style Bowie knife, with an iron quillon, is embellished with silver inlay and pommel. Its grip is sculpted from Sambar stag.



Robert Weil

in-depth research and experimental archeology, regarding traditional style and methods of productions, is overwhelming. Each year, it is quite noticeable that skills are better honed and attention to sophisticated detail is more focused. Artistic creations are being produced of a quality that often is almost unbelievable.

THE MAN

John's father was instrumental in inspiring his early interest, introducing him to a myriad of hand tools. It didn't take long for John to discover his own inherent interest in gunsmithing and knife making. Also born in him was an interest in the cowboy era, and the western way of life. He spent days looking at old photos and paintings, and says that most every piece of old gear on exhibit at any one of the many gun shows he attended, will quite possibly still have his fingerprints on it.

John fashioned his first knife and his first pair of spurs when he was 12. He built his first rifle when he was 16 and it is still a prized possession. This rifle has been an evolving work of art and is record of John's growth thru the years. He writes:

"In regards to the Somerset/Huntington Rifle...I always had a love for the long slick gingerbread rifles out of the pre 1830-50's and even post of that time too. I built this rifle between 1963-64 with a 44 inch, 32caliber, 13/16 inch, Numrich barrel. It originally had been on a Dixie Gunworks flintlock mountain rifle. It had a moon cheek piece inlay, thumb piece, heart on either side of the wrist and oval inlays along the forestock for the barrel retaining pins. It had no engraving. The bone inlay on the underside of the butt has the original hen scratching. I used the rifle



National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

Above: This elaborate "Scarf Slide" was made in 2009 for the prestigious "Cowboy Crossings" show held at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. It is proudly emblazoned with the TCAA logo.

Below is a cantleplate, a silver decoration for the back of a saddle seat. It is fashioned from sterling silver and engraved in Victorian style.

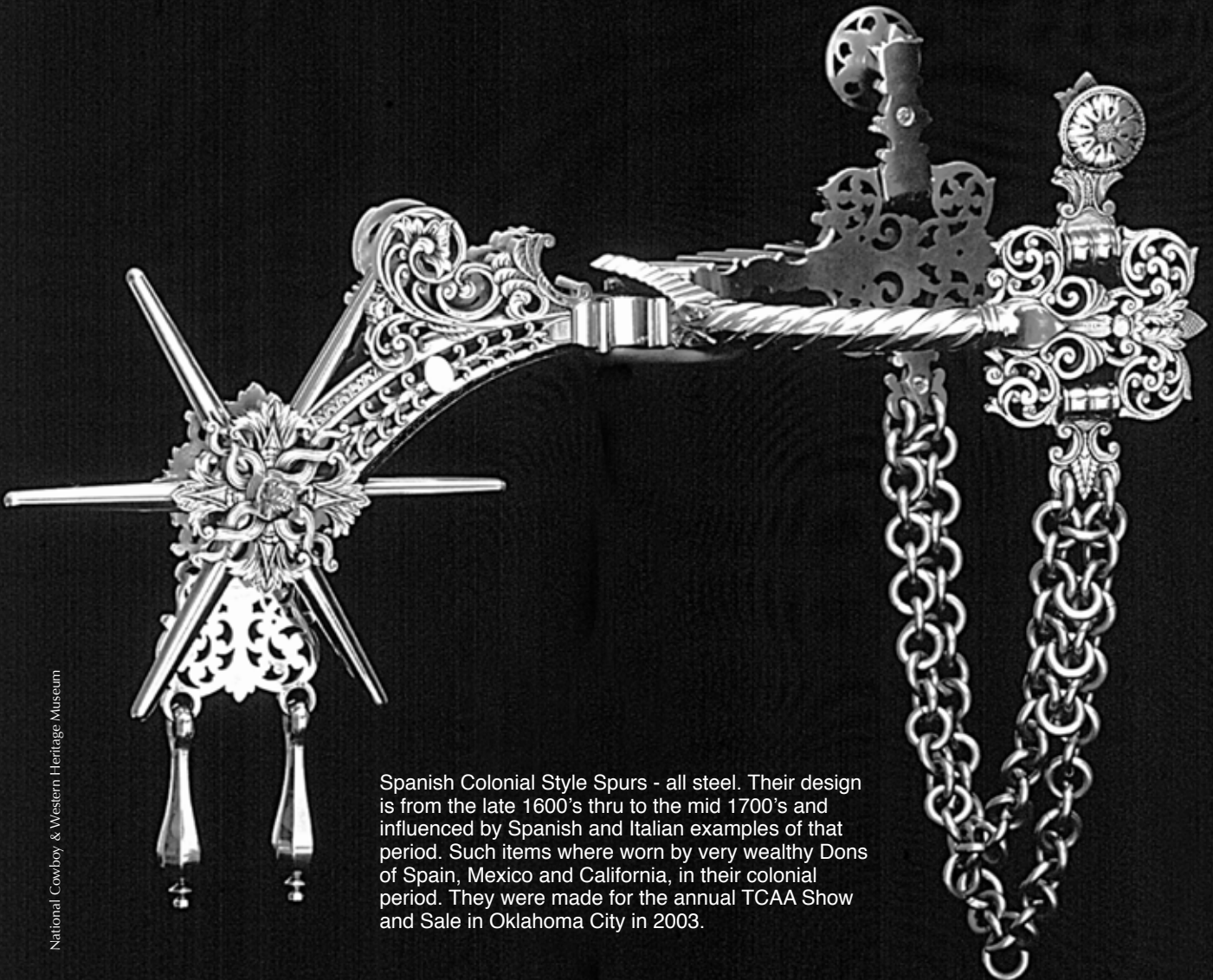


Jamie Emms



Jamie Ennis

This pair of steel and silver inlaid Tapia Style Spurs were inspired by a pair owned by the famous Western artist and author, Charlie Russell. They were made in 2011, especially for the TCAA and CAA combined annual show and sale called "Cowboy Crossings" held at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.



National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

Spanish Colonial Style Spurs - all steel. Their design is from the late 1600's thru to the mid 1700's and influenced by Spanish and Italian examples of that period. Such items were worn by very wealthy Dons of Spain, Mexico and California, in their colonial period. They were made for the annual TCAA Show and Sale in Oklahoma City in 2003.

John says this "Virginia Fantasy Rifle" was experimentation and a canvas for what you might call high Rococo. The two-piece patchbox, with unique "turtle back" lid, was his idea and design.



Robert Weil

The carving and engraving exhibited on and around the tang and wrist is a study in Rococo movement and style.

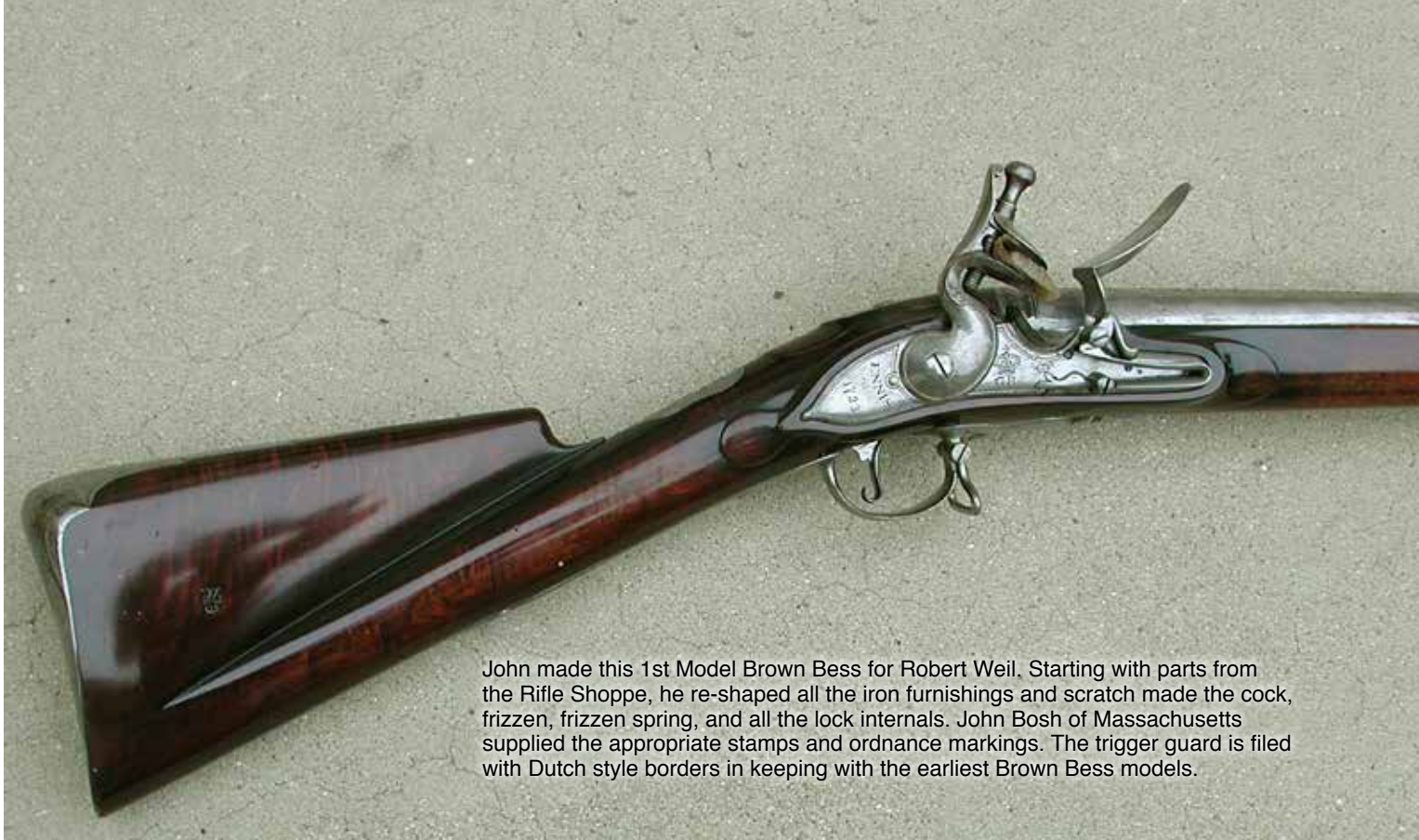


Robert Weil



Once again, we find John using the heart motif on the cheek of this "over the top" rifle. Its rococo styling flows gracefully with the high relief carving that frames the cheek piece.

Robert Weil



John made this 1st Model Brown Bess for Robert Weil. Starting with parts from the Rifle Shoppe, he re-shaped all the iron furnishings and scratch made the cock, frizzen, frizzen spring, and all the lock internals. John Bosh of Massachusetts supplied the appropriate stamps and ordnance markings. The trigger guard is filed with Dutch style borders in keeping with the earliest Brown Bess models.

Robert Weil

all the time until I got out of the service in 1970. About 1974 I was able to start to learn engraving due to the publication of James Meeks book The Art of Engraving and I proceeded to apply what I had learned using this rifle as a canvas. Also at that time I made a new percussion lock for it, which had no engraving until recently. My first engraving was on the ramrod entry pipe, buttplate, patchbox, toeplate, script on the barrel, cheek inlay, the hearts on the wrist and the ovals on the fore-end. A couple of years ago, I did what I always wanted to do to this rifle and complete the vision I had as a kid and was unable to do then. I engraved the lock. Inlaid and engraved the comb plate, forearm plate, breech tang and the remainder of the silver inlays. I re-did the carving at the end of the comb and the molding lines on the forearm. I engraved the lock in the Baltimore-English style. There is a little of the old and a little of the new and the rifle is a combined history of my growth. As a child I always wanted to be a gunsmith and had a deep love for antique rifles and Kentucky rifles in particular. I had a coonskin cap that I wore from the age of three until it fell apart in the Davy Crockett (Disney) era. My fondness for this rifle spans more than 50 years hence it holds for me many memories and dreams accomplished."

After a stint in the U.S. Air Force,

he returned to California and a job as an electroplater. On the GI Bill, he went to the Colorado School of Trade, a gunsmith school, and for four years, he worked and finished his education.

In 1990, he left the aerospace industry where he was a tool and die maker for an aircraft company. Combining formal training in gunsmithing from the Colorado School of Trades and years of experience as a tool and die maker, Ennis started a business restoring antique firearms. He incorporated bit and spur making into his business in 1998. He did various things in order to make enough money for his family to survive. He restored antique firearms and bits, spurs, leathers, knives, swords, and sheaths. He made spurs, straps, buckles, cuffs, holsters, and gun belts. And he built several Kentucky rifles while he continued his restoration work. In addition, he did a lot of engraving for customers and still does the restoration work but now tries to leave more time for his creative artwork.

In 1998, John was one of the founders of the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association. It is an organization that is dedicated to preserving, teaching and promoting the skills of saddlemaking, bit and spur making,

silver-smithing and rawhide braiding, and the role of the traditional crafts and arts in the cowboy culture of the North American West. Their annual meeting is a prestigious event that has garnered attention on an international scale. The Cowboy Crossings Annual show intermingles the art of the Cowboy Artists of America and the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association. It attracts a group of loyal patrons, traveling internationally to learn, peruse and purchase authentic "Western" works of art that range in value from several hundred to well over \$100,000.

The work of John Ennis is cutting edge. It is the epitome of the contemporary longrifle culture. Some would say that it's a breath of fresh air! Whether it's a 1st Model Brown Bess musket, a British or French Dragoon, his version of a Kentucky rifle, an 1840's Baltimore style pistol, or a silver mounted pair of Western era Spanish spurs, they are all unique. You will find they exhibit very few borrowed artistic ideas; they are creations from individual artistic urges, all excellent and embracing a spirit that only John C. Ennis, III could give them. **M**