The Publication for Traditional Black Powder Shooters

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014





Jim Riblen Diverse Artistry in the Longrifle Culture

Mel S. Hankla

N THE INTRODUCTION OF Robert Weil's groundbreaking 1980 book, Contemporary Makers John Bivins presented terms for three different styles of gunmakers: Interpreters, Documentarians, and New School. Mark Silver, in his introduction of the museum catalog, Three Centuries of Tradition, explained that, "Documentary" is the closest to an existing antique and "New School" is the most divergent." Many builders of contemporary firearms strive to be very traditional, studying old methods and styles. Many have a favorite geographic style of firearm, with some builders being well known for their interpretations that faithfully follow the unwritten rules of design of a specific geographic region. The work of almost all contemporary builders would, at one time or another, be

considered an interpretation of another artist's work and this is not always motivated by the work of an old master. Hershel House along with his brothers Frank and John have inspired a legion of contemporary builders and each "Woodbury School" rifle is readily recognizable regardless of the maker. Practicing a more controlled approach, some artists "copy" doing their absolute best to document the old masters, precisely following in meticulous detail not only the style, but also the construction methods of specific antique arms. The disciplined task of reproducing a faithful representation is known as a "bench copy," as the maker literally has the original lying on the bench providing detailed guidance. On the other end of this spectrum are the New School makers, whose philosophy is to create firearms as aesthetically pleasing as possible.

Jim Kibler is an artist, a professional gunmaker, whose existing work covers the full spectrum of these three classified styles. However, his personal working philosophy is that historical correctness is subordinate and will not be allowed to stand in the way of artistic design. Jim was born March 20th, 1975. He grew up in the small town of Hanoverton,



Ohio, and currently lives just outside of town. For 12 years he was a professional Metallurgical Engineer, earning a Bachelor of Science degree at Ohio State University in 1997. While in his teens, his father collected a late period (1875) percussion rifle made by Hanoverton, Columbiana County, Óhio gunsmith William Johnson. Jim was quite taken with this little rifle and it created great interest and provoked much intrigue. His father was the local historian and had a great love for history and a good eye for form, style and beauty. Fruit has not fallen far from the tree as these traits were obviously passed on to Jim. Dying way too young, at only 46 years old, Jim's father William "Bill" Kibler, lost his battle with leukemia in 1996. Jim states, "If I've had success, a lot of the credit should go to my parents. They always supported my interests and

encouraged me to find my own path. My dad in particular was a huge influence to me."

When asked how and when he got started he replied:

"I always liked to build things and work with my hands, so when I noticed an old gun kit at my Grandparents, that had belonged to my uncle, I became interested. I put this gun together and my interests grew. My first real exposure to building these guns was in the book "Foxfire 5". I built a pistol from a blank with parts I got from Dixie Gunworks and shortly after this I built a rifle from a blank. I was sixteen or so. I continued building a few rifles until I went off to college. I was involved to some degree for a few years during college, but not much. After college and working forty hours a week, it once again became important."

Jim started building guns professionally in the



92

Inset (Above Left): Detailed view of a crisp tang carving while on the bench – still in the white.

The rifle on the left would fall in the New School category and is somewhat inspired from the famous "Johanes Faber" rifle, number 117 in George Shumway's, *Rifles of Colonial American, Volume II.* On the right is Kibler's interpretation of a rifle by George Eister.

2

summer of 2009. However before this time he was churning out rifles at a rather prolific rate. Many of these rifles were plain to some extent, but all were elegant in their simplicity. Using the classifications identified by Bivins, most of these rifles would be considered "interpretations." While perusing the early work of Jim Kibler, it is obvious that the 18th century York County, Pennsylvania gunsmith George Schroyer influenced this young budding rifle maker to a large extent.

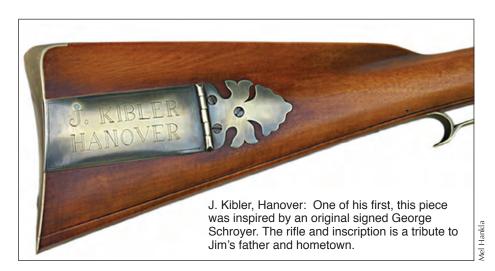
One of his first, was a rifle similar to number 91 (a rifle attributed to George Schroyer) in Dr. George Shumway's Rifles of Colonial America Volume II, but with a bit more Berks County influence. There is a story behind "Hanover" being engraved on the patchbox lid. Hanoverton, Jim's hometown, was originally named Hanover. Many of the old timers still call it Hanover. His father tried his best to get the name changed back. "My inscription is to show my appreciation for my little town and is a tribute to my Dad," he told me. The barrel is by the Rice brothers: .54 caliber, 44 inches long. The lock is a Chambers Early Ketland that has been altered, casehardened and well tuned. The touchhole is not lined, but rather direct drilled and internally coned, providing for a traditional yet very quick and reliable ignition. The stock has 13-5/8 inches of pull and is fashioned from very hard and dense quarter sawn, but plain, sugar maple stock from Dick Miller. It was finished primarily using scrapers and stained

with aqua fortis. All components except the barrel, lock and screws are handmade. Jim comments, "I wanted to keep the rifle fairly conservative and not too elaborate. I tried to shape the stock to have strong bold architecture with carving that compliments it well."

He was very successful with his artistic endeavor.

Formal Training

The National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, in conjunction with Western Kentucky University's Department of Architectural and Manufacturing Sciences, has hosted an annual Gunsmithing Seminar for 32 years. The participants learn the art and craft of making an American longrifle. It is a rare opportunity where students get to handle and intimately study antique rifles. There is no other place in the world one can get this kind of experience and the instructors are literally a "Who's Who" of the greats in the contemporary gunmaking world. Hundreds of gunmakers worldwide, have taken advantage of the unique experience provided by the workshop and seminar offered at WKU. Jim Kibler was a repeating student at this seminar, starting in 2004 with an engraving class under the famed Gunsmith of Williamsburg, Wallace Gusler. Jim returned each year for the next seven years, when, in a scenario where student becomes master, he was asked to become an instructor. His skills and talent as an acclaimed gunbuilder put him in front of the class to teach incised and relief carving. Jim's class introduced students to the process and techniques used in creating traditional longrifle carving, including tool selection and sharpening, carving design, and execution. This past year (2013) he taught, "Making Double Set Triggers." Starting from bar stock, his students fabricated single-phase,



Ric Lambert

Above: This sleek rifle is fashioned with a take down stock, made from a "pear" tree. It somewhat follows the work of John Newcomer.

Below: Documentary or "bench copy" of the rifle commonly known as Number 42, in Shumway's, *Rifles of Colonial America, Volume I.* Wallace Gusler has attributed this rifle to Moravian gunmaker, Valentine Beck, while working in Bethabara, North Carolina. Kibler handmade the flintlock on this piece.

Ric Lambert

Below: The off side of the Number 42 "bench copy" shown above illustrates Jim's command of duplicating Beck's masterful relief carving.

double set triggers appropriate for a longrifle, and received detailed instruction that focused upon trigger design, construction techniques, and heat treatment.

New School

We have become comfortable these days with another term most often used in conjunction with very elaborate rifles: Fantasy. It is to some extent unclear which of Bivins' headings these unbelievable creations might come under. Perhaps they are a mix between Interpretation and New School. The point is, the American longrifle is still evolving. These fantasy guns are a continuation of an art form that goes back for generations. They are artistic expressions built on architectural foundations laid long ago. They are contemporary: "of the present time; modern." I have said before that today's contemporary longrifle culture is a lot like the argument about today's country music. You have the George Jones (Traditionalist) builders and the (New School) Jason Aldeans. Not everyone agrees or is attracted to both ends of this spectrum, but each, and all between are part of the ever-changing plethora of items created by our passion. John Bivins often expounded, "Historic gunmaking has pushed far beyond mere nostalgia and the experience

of recapturing an earlier time."

Design of the rifle shown in figure 3 on page 77 and the inset on page 76 falls within the style of what most would consider New School, however it's somewhat of a fantasy. Jim unveiled it at the 2007 NMLRA Gunbuilding Seminar at Western Kentucky University and literally flabbergasted students and instructors alike! Many of the carving elements expertly executed on this rifle are very similar to those sometimes used by John Bivins and were indeed inspired by his work. Jim had reservations about this rifle since it was not totally inspired by existing schools of antique gunmaking. However, I feel this rifle is sort of like a modern arrangement of the music from Handel's Messiah, only played on a piano instead of a harpsichord. It's just fantastic, but not really like any original rifle you'll ever find. I feel it is indeed Jim Kibler stretching his wings, jumping out of the nest and deciding that gunbuilding is fun! It was only his third rifle "from the stick!" The carving on this rifle is masterful. It flows remarkably well from the cheekpiece to the tang, continuing to the rear entry thimble. It is very sophisticated and elaborate, yet still tasteful; extremely well executed. For those familiar with the work of the late John Bivins, this rifle immediately makes one think

of John's r e m a r k a b l e talent and designs. But Jim has not copied Bivins' work, but rather built upon it and enhanced the designs John borrowed from the masters of long ago. John Bivins would have simply loved this rifle, and so do I.

The exceptionally figured stump cut sugar maple stock was from the late Freddie Harrison and is stained dark with aqua fortis and finished with linseed oil. All the hardware except the lock and barrel were hand produced by Jim. The barrel is by the Rice brothers, is 44 inches long and .54 caliber. The heart of the rifle is a well-tuned and modified Chambers Early Ketland lock, which Jim casehardened.

Documentary Work

As to working as a documentarian, Jim says that as times goes on he finds it harder to want to produce a copy of an existing rifle. However, this is not to say that he is not interested in doing such. *"It takes something really*" A contemporary masterpiece exhibiting exceptional artistic design and execution. The architecture of this mid 18th century, London styled fowling piece follows the lines of an original John Harmon fowler, however, its buttplate, sideplate, and thumpiece are Kibler's designs.

Jim Ribler

The sophisticated sculptured sterling silver sideplate was fashioned and cast by Jim as was the elaborate buttplate.

The lock on this mid 18th *century, London styled fowling piece is handmade.*

JAMES KIBLER

Jaster Gun Maker

The masterfully designed silver wire decoration on this fowler is the artwork of Jim, as is the engraving and chisel work on all the components.

The silver buttplate was designed, sculpted and cast by Kibler, as were all the silver mountings of this fowler.





This view of the pear stocked take down rifle shows the graceful flow of the carving from the tang throughout the length of the buttstock.

good to make me want to try and copy it. Duplicating something that's a little funky is really hard for me."

Over the last couple of years he has produced several bench copies "because they were great guns and were great opportunities to learn from." One of which is commonly known as Number 42, in Shumway's Rifles of Colonial America - Volume I. This very fine early rifle is also featured in Moravian Gun Making of the American *Revolution*, produced by the Kentucky Rifle Association, as well as Bill Ivey's, North Carolina Schools of Longrifles 1765-1865. Wallace Gusler has researched and written extensively about this 18th century rifle dating from the middle 1760's to perhaps the early 1770's. It is attributed to Valentine Beck while he was working in either Bethabara or Salem, North Carolina. The carving on this rifle is highly detailed and very accomplished. It is one of the finest examples of the American longrifle from the early period. "The finish may be a little finer on my #42 gun" Jim replied, "but other than that it's pretty darn close".

The featured Silvey fowler is a close representation of an elaborate 18th century piece by Englishman John Harmon, although it cannot be considered a "bench copy." As close as it is, the butt plate, silver thumb piece and wirework are all Jim's designs, thus slightly crossing the line into the category of being an interpretation. However, the lock is a handmade copy, and the barrel, stock, and individual hand wrought components are faithfully precise.

Continuing our conversation, Jim states, "I've noticed that all these projects have influenced my current work

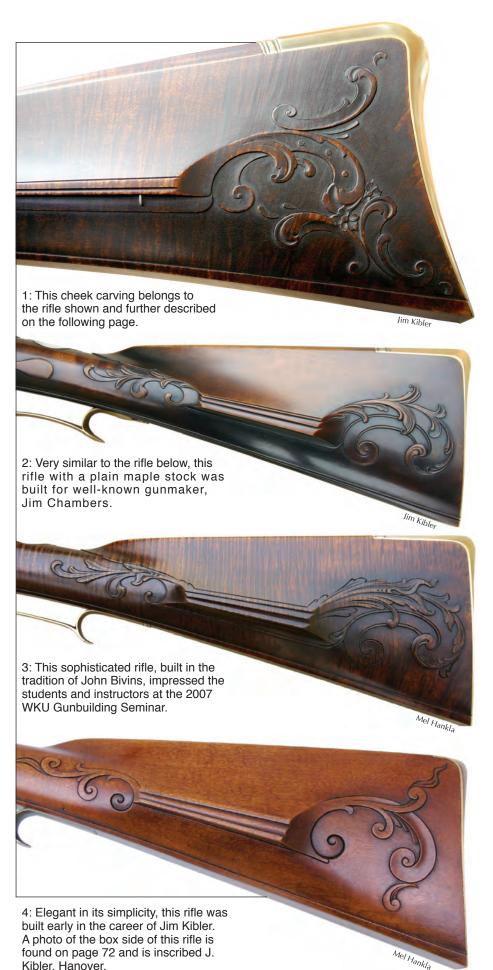


to some degree. I'm not sure my approach has changed a huge amount over time, although I think my sense of style has gotten better as well as being able to put together a complete product where all the pieces come together and work well. I enjoy trying to create something new, different and unique, more than anything."

And then I ask him, so what motivates you? "In a nutshell, it's trying to create something cool that has that appeal. The kind of gun, or whatever, that makes you want to pick it up and not let go. The kinds of things that makes you say "wow" to yourself and makes you want it! I don't always get there, but that's what I try for. For some builders absolute historical correctness is the driving force. For others a story in their mind is the motivation, but for me it is the form, design, and trying to make something beautiful. It can be something as plain basic as a mountain rifle or an over the top 17th century French fowling piece. They all can be wonderful. From one perspective it may seem that I'm not much of a traditionalist, but it's all of these wonderful designs from the past that inspire me. My work is probably pretty particular, even from a contemporary perspective, maybe even

del Hankla

Ael Hankla



Kibler, Hanover.



This "Acanthus Leaf" tang carving is found on a rifle Kibler made for Jim Chambers. This is the same rifle as figure 2 at left.

a little fussy, but this is my approach. Things sometimes change over time and I'm sure my work will as well."

I also asked Jim's good friend and well-known gunmaker, Ian Pratt, his thoughts on Jim's work and its impact on the longrifle culture. In his quick witted manner, he replied, "It's often said that a person who excels in their field has "raised the bar" to a new height by which the efforts of others must then be measured.... well, as a gun builder, Jim took the bar and threw it somewhere up into a tree. He strikes a very successful balance between tradition and his own edgy originality, and he has the vision and skills to bring it all together. I always look forward to seeing what he is working on."

In Conclusion

The contemporary art world is based primarily upon artistic ideas of others. Some are ancient, some rather new. There are very few totally original ideas these days. Michelangelo stated that, "Art is an *idea*". I feel that the difference between an artist and a craftsman is just that: if you take an order and build a longarm A gun attributed to the Valley of Virginia, affectionately known as the "Woodsrunner", inspired this elegant rifle. However, this piece is much more elaborate with complex relief carving and forestock molding.

lim Kibler

to the specifications of the consignor, then you are indeed only a craftsman, producing someone else's vision; but if you build what is in your heart, mind and soul, then you can truly express your artistic urges and indeed become an artist! My friends, Jim Kibler is one of the most dedicated and talented artists in the longrifle culture. His work is crisp, clean and well executed. His skills are unique in the gunbuilding world. His attention to detail is remarkable and his design, carving and finishes rival the old masters. His architectural style and artistic expression prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a piece of highly figured wood is not needed to make a beautiful rifle. The talent of Jim Kibler really shows because he builds what's in his heart. Summing up his philosophy pretty well, he told me, "I want to use somewhat creative designs that appeal to my eye, but that don't become too complex. That doesn't deviate from the original makers work too awful much and flows with continuity throughout the piece." I feel he is very successful in his endeavor.

Jim Kibler's rifles are shooters! They are well balanced, shoulder well and feel great in the hand. His locks are well tuned, deadly fast and they make great hunting arms as M attested by this happy hunter.



Right: Dr. Barry Maxfield celebrating with his Kibler rifle. He took this elk near Oak Creek, Colorado in October, 2007, dropping him dead in his tracks with a neck shot. He was using a .530 round ball and 90 grains of FFFg black powder.

Below: A detailed view of the graceful tang carving.

