

The Kentucky Rifle. By Merrill Lindsay. Photographs by Bruce Pendleton. (York, Pa.: The Historical Society of York County, 1972. Pp. [100]. Illustrations. \$15.00.)

The name "Kentucky rifle" is intrinsically such a misnomer that even omnivorous Kentuckians who stand ready on the glimmer of a legend to claim all things realize the rifle originated elsewhere. Merrill Lindsay, the author of this book, is somewhat less than clear in his explanation of the origin of the name "Kentucky," except to say Kentucky frontiersmen bought their guns in Pennsylvania. He all but implies a connection between the name of the gun and the Battle of New Orleans, and between the gun and Samuel Woodworth's famous ballad, "The Hunters of Kentucky." Drawing a fine line of distinction between a true "Kentucky rifle" in the classic sense and the common mountaineer's "hog rifle," Lindsay no doubt is correct in saying that few Kentucky rifles were made in that state. There were, however, some local gunsmiths. There is a thesis in the University of Kentucky graduate collection which gives at least some of the history of the state's gunsmiths.

Lindsay has divided the gun types of Kentucky rifles into the products of "schools" which are defined in terms of local places in Pennsylvania and North Carolina where gunsmiths gave their products distinctive trim and form. There can be no question that the author has assembled a fine representative sampling of the handiwork of "the more creative gunsmiths of the 18th and 19th centuries." He has traced European influences as they were merged with American modifications and innovations.

The superb photographic exhibits illustrating this book clearly detail the Kentucky rifle's characteristics and varying types. The succinct paragraphs describing the individual illustrations collectively comprise a technical history of Pennsylvania gunmaking. Generally there are some common features of the rifle, no matter to which school the maker belonged, which show considerable conformity. These were long barrels, usually rifled, long and graceful stocks which extended forward into graceful barrel and lock cradles. Most of the stocks were made from magnificent bolts of crotch walnut or tiger maple and were carved with a considerable

variety of graceful designs and figures. There were cheek pieces or rests, butts were brass bound, patch boxes were elaborate brass utilities as well as ornamentations, and there were frequently handsome cheek piece metal plates. The flint or breech mechanism differed in design from maker to maker, but not in fundamental principles. This was also true of the trigger and guard mechanism.

The brass and silver trimmings placed on the Kentucky rifles by the Pennsylvania and North Carolina gunsmiths, including the elaborate stock carvings, have a strong flavor of American folk adaptations of old world rococo design and motif. Occasionally a silver plate reflected the spirit of American nationalism by use of the spread eagle, even though the eagles' heads were more often German or Austrian in character. Some adornments reflected the American passion for hunting in the use of animal figures.

A section of the book is devoted to the "Kentucky pistol." These graceful elbow shaped weapons were as intricately carved and filigreed as were the rifles themselves. In fact they seem almost hand varieties of the long guns.

This is a well conceived book which gives in precise detail the background of muzzleloading flintlock rifle history. It grew out of the labors of Joe Kindig, Jr., who sought to draw together an exhibit of the finest specimens of rifles made between 1760 and 1860 but who died before the exhibit was completed in the York County Historical Museum. The photographs are so excellently done that the reader loses all sense that he is looking at instruments of death and destruction, but he can rather see them as superb folk artistic creations which formed a bridge between old world and American frontier cultures. In dealing with both the precisions and subtleties of writing about guns, Lindsay has demonstrated in his text a high degree of technical confidence growing out of good scholarship. This book surely must meet even the most hypercritical approval of the confirmed gun collector and student. The gun is presented here as a firearm and not as an instrument influencing the spread of population or as the deciding factor in military conflict.