

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN RICKETS

BY BOB STATLER

In the early 1890's, a newspaper in Mansfield, Ohio, the MANSFIELD NEWS, published a series of interviews with prominent local citizens of the city. One of these articles was with John Ricketts, a long time Richland County Ohio gunsmith, former city council member, and a resident of Mansfield for over 50 years. These stories were titled "Another Old Time Citizen Talks" and this one was printed on April 22, 1894 [Vol. X. No. 47, Mansfield News]. This is very interesting, having a 19th century Ohio gunsmith's career on paper in his own words! Below is the article in its entirety.

"Everybody knows John Ricketts, the veteran gunsmith, and this is a modest autobiography he gave this NEWS reporter in response to a request. 'I was born January 4, 1817 in Franklin County about 7 miles from Columbus, on what we used to call Elm Creek. People then, that is about four-fifths of them, lived in log cabins. Columbus was not a very big place then, about 3 or 4 thousand people. We lived on a farm until I was 13 years old and then my folks moved into Columbus'".

"I went to learn the trade of a gunsmith with Samuel Thompson and after an apprenticeship of 4 years, went to Lancaster [Ohio] and worked for George W. Claspill for the best part of a year. The next thing I did was to start out afoot. I walked to Chillicothe, then to Xenia, from there to Springfield and back home to Columbus. Didn't get work anywhere."

"I came to Mansfield in 1835, footed it all the way and all I had was \$10, the suit of clothes I wore and an extra shirt. I didn't know anybody nor did anybody know me."

"I got work with John M. Holmes who kept a shop in a little one-story building on North Main Street about where Sorg's Jewelry Store is. He left in about a year and I went to work for Henry Maize who had a shop at the northeast corner of Main and Bloom streets. A good many people remember him. After I worked for him for 3 or 4 years, I started up for myself and had my little shop about where my shop was in late years."

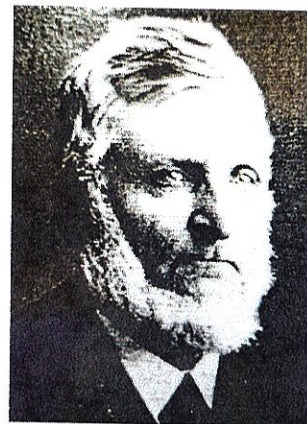
"Next I moved over to the lot north of the Masonic Temple and from there I went over on East 4th Street about halfway between Main and Diamond, bought a lot and had my shop there several years, then traded for a property on North

Main next to the Straub lot, which I afterwards sold and then bought my present property on North Main. Hugh McCalif once lived there but the house has burned down. McCalif died and I bought the property off his widow. That must have been 32 years ago. I had my shop there and worked my trade ever since until recently. I sold out to Gibbons 4 years ago and quit. When he was elected county commissioner, he concluded to quit so I took the shop back again. But my old legs couldn't stand it, so I sold out again and now I intend to stay quit."

"I was a member of the first fire company which McFall told you about in last Sunday's paper and I was also a member of the Mansfield Artillery Company. There were 100 in the company and we mustered for 7 years. That was 50 odd years ago. We never had any actual service more than to be called out about twice a year for drill and on holidays, especially the 4th of July."

"Yes, I'm better off than when I first came her. I still own that lot on North Main and the property where I live, on west 4th Street."

There are a couple pieces of information I want to clarify from the newspaper article. Volume I of Hutslar's Ohio Gunsmith book mentions Samuel Thompson advertising, wanting to hire gunsmiths, while he was working in Columbus, Ohio in 1822. Thompson also worked in Lancaster, Ohio, possibly by 1826, then went back to Columbus. So, where exactly Ricketts spent the years working for Thompson is not 100% clear. Also, Ricketts mentioned working for John M. Holmes when he arrived in Mansfield. This gentleman is apparently a gunsmith not previously known assuming he was in the gunsmithing business. (See Fig. 1 for a photograph of Ricketts.)



J. SCHARP RIFLE, SHELBY COUNTY

BY MARK BENDER

John Scharp (1809 -?) is recorded as living in Shelby County from 1850 (according to the census of that year) to at least 1878, the year he last appears in the local trade's directory of Sidney, the county seat (Hutslar 1973:358). He is reported to have immigrated from Switzerland at an early age and married a woman from Pennsylvania. A Jacob Scharp also listed in the 1850 census may be his son. Alternate spellings for the Scharp name may be "Sharp" and "Scharpe." Scharp was one of about twenty names of gunsmiths and allied tradesmen in the latter 19th century working in Shelby County. By the time Scharp likely arrived in Shelby County, the area around Sidney, located on the banks of tributaries of the Great Miami on the old trade routes north of Piqua (where the Johnston Historical Farm and Indian Agency dating to the War of 1812 era park is located) and just south of old Fort Loramie, had been settled for several decades and most of the remnant Native American population of Shawnee and other tribes had been removed by 1830. The early decades of frontier strife and development were now just memories among the original waves of settlers and the rolling landscape had been transformed into farmlands with strict boundaries, occasional woodlots, and platted small towns. Many of the settler locals were of Germanic descent, a situation Scharp may have found favorable, though his reasons for settling his family there are unknown. The population and transport hubs of Dayton and Cincinnati were relatively nearby, connected by networks of roads and canals, and local gunsmiths may have sourced gun parts from these areas, as well as points east. Sidney today has a population of around 20,000, and has many examples of outstanding 19th century architecture, some of it, such as the huge courthouse complex, may have been erected in Scharp's later years.

A few rifles stamped or engraved "J. Scharp," have been sold at auction (online or live) in recent years and otherwise surfaced amongst collectors, including a curly maple stocked half stock with a back action lock and a roman-nosed full stock in walnut with a "fancy" trigger guard, a small oval cap box, and eight brass inlays escutcheons around the barrel key slots along the stock. The present article will examine the structural and artistic features of another surviving full stock on a similar pattern, this one with german silver, silver, and brass inlays, and a large brass patch box.

Gracile vs Robust

Since the late 1920s, archeologists (most notably Raymond Dart), began studying fossil remains of a hominin dating to 4.2 million years ago in Africa. The species *Australopithecus* was subsequently identified as having two general body types – "gracile" or "robust" (see Wikipedia link). The gracile specimens had lighter bone structure, more delicate skull features, and sharp crested teeth suited for eating fruit. The robust were heavier boned with more angular skull structure and flatter teeth for mashing vegetation. These two terms are useful in discussing the extremes of stylistic characteristics of many 19th century Ohio full and half stock long rifles. Many "gracile" rifles with slimmer barrels and slim stock styles were commonly made in several parts of Ohio and neighboring states, especially western Pennsylvania.

Examples of "gracile" rifles would include certain elegantly sculpted rifles produced by the Vincents of Washington county, in comparison to the more "robust" rifles made by their neighbor A.C. McGirr. Another example would be the long, slim rifles by D.T. Hawken of Springfield and the very robust rifles produced by the Hawken brothers in Missouri for the Western trade (illustrated in recent issues of the newsletter). Of course, many gun shops produced a range of sizes and styles in accord to customer wishes. The heavy-barreled Eastern target rifles such built by William

Billinghurst and Nelson Lewis of New York state, and Peter Reinhardt of Ohio, are in a class of their own.

Stylistic Features of the J. Scharp Rifle

The pronounced roman nose and general outline of the stock of the J. Scharp rifle under discussion suggests a possible connection with late Upper Susquehanna rifle architecture, while certain features, in particular the bi-pointed side plate and the double loop trigger guard (see figures) and overall configuration seem to be drawing on a pool of gun making tradition and parts sources shared with the Hawken clan near Springfield, located about 40 miles away in Clark county (see the recent AOLRC two-part article and photo essay, Bender 2020-2021). The german silver inlays on the fore stock seem similar to those listed in a Tryon catalog from the 1870s (Hanson 1960, p. 38, plate 19). The unengraved patch box also may be a modified "catalog" item (as may be the rococo brass inlays straddling the tang and the german silver hunter's star on the cheekpiece); and it is interesting how close the patch box pattern is to the patch box of Mariano Modena's St. Louis Hawken rifle, made of steel – suggesting a widespread use of mass-produced gun hardware in the industrialized latter percussion era (Baird 1976: 32, plate 45).

The J. Scharp rifle discussed here has rather robust stock architecture built around a 40-plus inch long, 1 inch in diameter octagon barrel of about .36 caliber. The impressive roman nose rises prominently from the wrist and defines the backward sweep of the substantial stock. The large brass butt plate has a modest crescent shape in comparison to some severely deep crescents on many more gracile Ohio guns of this era. The butt plate is finely filed, as is the double scrolled trigger guard, both prominent features of the rifle. The well-situated and well-inlet brass patch box has three cut-outs and no engraving, and though nearly 8 inches long (along the centerline), physically sits rather high in the wide stock, with an axis on a line extending from the rear of the lock plate to the anterior point of the patch box through the center of the lid, just below the patch box catch.

The woodwork is straightforward and competent, with curves in the right places around the lock mouldings and the buttstock and fore stock well-shaped. The eight german silver key escutcheons (the rear pair of different patterns than the elliptical forward pairs) contrast nicely with the dark maple stock (which barely shows the curl), and contributes to the solid effect of the rifle. More subtle touches are the brass rococo-esque inlays straddling the 2 ½ inch tang. The tiny round silver thumbpiece and the german silver 8-pointed hunter's star are well-placed accents which mirror celestial bodies, and in the case of the star, provide hunter's luck and protection in accord with folk lore – though could also serve simply as decoration. The rifle also sports a substantial percussion lock (which seems to have been blued at time of production) decorated with foliate engraving and on a conservative flintlock pattern, including a small point at the posterior extreme. It is marked "Jos.H Goulcher," denoting a well-known lock making family in Philadelphia. The half stock Sharp mentioned above is appointed with a back action lock marked "G. Goulcher." A subtle detail is the tiny, squared notch at the anterior end of the thin brass toe plate.

One wonders the purpose of such a robust rifle in mid to late western Ohio. Shooting matches, small game hunting, hog butchering, varmint control, and even family protection could have been motivations. As well as the folk idea of just having a gun around. The frontier had passed, and such guns, maybe of a bigger bore, would be more suited for parts farther west – and