

E. BIRD - OHIO TO IOWA

BY RON YERIAN

It is virtually impossible to hold a "signed" longrifle in one's hands and not wonder about the person who made it. I suppose the questions that come to mind - when did the gunsmith make it, where did he live, where was he born and where did he die, the dates of his lifespan, where did he learn his trade, and myriad other questions, along with the answers - can be labeled "biographical information".

The value of such information varies with the person viewing it. To the collector, such knowledge adds to the joy of possessing not only a beautiful item but of being able to describe its history. To the purveyor of antique and collectible firearms, such knowledge can add considerably to the monetary value of a signed longrifle. To a descendant or someone with a family connection, the value can be simply in preserving and hopefully passing on some family history.

Some sixty years ago, I was gifted a longrifle with the etched signature "E. Bird" on the barrel. At that time, the printed information available on early gunsmiths primarily consisted of early census data that recorded an individual's location, occupation, and date and location of birth. The first real information on early gunsmiths that I had access to did not appear until 1973 or so in Donald Hutslar's *Gunsmiths of Ohio*. In short, all I knew about E. Bird was his full name - Elias Bird - that he was born in Virginia, and that he worked in Muskingum County, Ohio around 1850. Indeed, that was about the only information available in 1998 when our Association published Volume IV of *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesman*. Volume XXX Number 1 of our ALORC Newsletter pictured an elegant longrifle by Elias Bird, but offered no additional

biographical information.

Finally, Dr. James B. Whisker was able to discover the journey of Elias Bird to his final location in Oskaloosa Township, Mahaska County, Iowa in 1856. He apparently lived there until sometime after 1885. The findings of Dr. Whisker are reported in his article entitled "Elias Bird", published in Volume 78, Number 11 of MUZZLE BLASTS, the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association's Official Publication. The Article also contains pictures of three Elias Bird signed longrifles. Dr. Whisker reported much the same information in *Arms Makers of Ohio*, authored by himself and Kevin Ray Spiker, Jr., published in 2017

The final resting place of Elias Bird, however, had not been revealed at that time. About that same time, however, or shortly thereafter, John Shultz, a long-time AOLRC member, sent me some pictures of the large upright gravestone marking the burial plot of Elias Bird, Gunsmith, in Section 6, Lot 32 (2) in the cemetery of the Forest Cemetery Association, 634 North 9th Street, Oskaloosa, Iowa 52577. The stone is badly weathered, and the pictures do not show the date of his death.

I now have much more to ponder as I hold my E. Bird longrifle. The history of this gunsmith mirrors the migration of many gunsmiths in the early 19th century who moved west to areas of greater opportunity as our country expanded. If your favorite gunsmith disappeared from the Ohio census records, it may be that the call of less competition and more eager customers pulled him west along the National Road.

(Author's Note: I will share the pictures that I received from John at the next few AOLRC events.)

IMAGES OF SPRING 2022 ANNUAL MARIETTA SHOW AT LAFAYETTE HOTEL

PHOTOS BY JUDY YERIAN

