

AN OHIO GUNSMITH

Alexander Ager (1821-1898)

New Rumley, Harrison Co. Ohio

By F. G. Tilton

Alexander Ager opened his gunshop in New Rumley, Harrison County, Ohio in 1848 and we are indeed fortunate to have in the possession of one of our collectors of Ohio Longrifles, Ager's Daybook from 1849 to 1895 covering a span of more than 46 years. There is a considerable accumulation of his personal papers and invoices from several supply houses that attest to the volume of work performed by this man. It is not known at this writing who the teacher of Ager was--possibly he was self-taught. It is on record that he taught school for a time. In his papers is a letter from one of his former students requesting the price of repairing and reconstructing a rifle that had belonged to this student's father.

Mr. Ager was a man of many talents as his Daybook shows. There are entries for "making an instrument for cutting tongue tied persons", "making a reed for an accordian", "repairing a threshing machine", many for "soldering a coffee pot", another for "a stamp for marking sheep", "to putting cog in boring machine", to altering stove pipe", "to steel toes on boots", "to repairing clock", "to pin in breastpin", "to key for dulcimer", "to repairing a parasol". These are just a few of the entries that attest to the fact that the local gunsmith was the general "Fixer of the community", at least in the case of Mr. Ager.

The earliest entry in the Daybook is dated May 22, 1849 for one John Burns as follows:

By making brass mounted gun \$6.19 2/3
 May 28, 1849

By making half brass mounted gun
 \$5.36 2/3

June 21, 1849

By making half brass mounted gun
 \$5.36 2/3

January 12, 1850

Settled up to this date

The above guns were all listed under the name John Burns. There are numerous entries of orders for guns, a few are reproduced:

1863

Half stocked gun to run from 170 to 200. 3 ft. or 3 ft. 2 in. long, worth sixteen dollars, common lock

.....for Wm McLane
 Dec. 26, 1863

Fullstocked gun, barrel 3 ft. 4 in. long, 1 inch in diameter, to run from 170 to 190, gain twist Write to Folks station F. A. Saxton

.....
 May 28, 1864

Fullstocked gun to run from 170 to 200 barrel 3 ft. 4 or 5 in. long, round box, bone sight thin ring around box. b.a. lock 16.50 For James W. States

.....
 Dec. 25, 1865

Full stocked gun, half mounted, no varnish. Price \$15.00 for V. Trushnel to be done in six weeks

.....

There appears another name along with Alex Ager beginning July 2, 1855, on the billing from various gun supply houses: Samuel A Devore. The last entry listing Ager & Devore is July 5, 1861. Almost nothing is known of Samuel A. Devore, but from the records he worked with or for Alex Ager for a period of at least 6 years. A persevering collector in that area should be able to come up with some information of Mr. Devore. In Ager's papers is the first time I've heard his name being mentioned. It would be very interesting to learn more about this gentleman.

Another interesting item among Mr. Ager's papers is the recipe for case hardening as follows:



Silver mounted rifle by Alexander Ager
photos courtesy of John Hudson



1/2 lb. refined Salamoniac
2 oz. salt petre
4 oz. fine salt
Pound them fine together. Heat and
roll in the mixture then heat and
throw in the water.

Recipe for Browning:
Spirits of wine 1/2 oz.
Tincture of steel 1 oz.
Corrosive Sublimate 1/4 oz.
Blue Vitrol 1 oz.
Sweet Spirits of Nitre 1/4 oz.
One quart water
The barrel must be cleaned with aqua-
forte and lay a few days in air slacked
lime.

The following is quoted verbatim:
"Receipt for Making Diamond Point"
Take 1 oz. mercury or 1 oz. nitre and
1 oz. salt and mix. Take a good arti-
cle of steel, heat until you have a
light chery red and dip in the mer-
cury or mixture until cool and you
will have a good diamond.

These pages do not permit the repro-
duction of the entire papers of Mr.

Ager, but I assure you that you can spend an entire evening reading the Daybook entries and the accompanying papers. Perhaps sometime in the future we can publish them in their entirety for the enjoyment of every one.

Mr. Ager was a prolific gun maker and there are numerous guns of his scattered among the many collectors. Occasionally one of the various dealers has one for sale.

His rifles were well made, although not fancy. His work was seldom en-

graved to any extent. His barrel mark was "A. Ager" in script on the top flat with the "g" lapping down onto the adjacent flat. This is the only mark I ever encountered on an Ager rifle. From his papers I gather that he bought all his locks ready made and used both back action and regular common bar locks. Occasionally a rifle is found that has a brass inlay covering the wood directly behind the lock. This protects the wood from the burn of the cap flash as the rifle is fired. □

		Darius' John Ager		Cr.	
		¢	cts	¢	cts
July	22	by making brass mounted gun	?	16	17½
"	28	" making half brass "	"	5	36½
June	11	by making half brass "	"	5	36½
"	26	to cash	6.00		
July	19	by making ½ brass gun		5	36½
"	"	to one set gun mountings	37½		
"	"	to gun stock & ramrod	25		
"	"	to shoot brass			
Sept.	25	to making ramrod	12½		
Oct.	30	to cash	6.00		
Jan.	1550 12	settled up to this date			

Page one of Ager's daybook, date 1849.



One of the most prolific makers of muzzleloading rifles in southeastern Ohio was Alexander C. McGirr of Marietta, Ohio. His work spans 45 years of gunsmithing from 1850 until 1895.

McGirr was born in Belmont Co., Ohio in 1825. He arrived in the river town of Marietta, in 1850. It is not known whether he was engaged in the making of rifles before his arrival. However, in 1852 he married Sarah Pratt, daughter of Elisha Pratt. Pratt and his father, Azariah, were gunsmiths, blacksmiths, and silver-smiths already established in Marietta. Azariah Pratt was one of the early settlers to arrive in Marietta from Massachusetts in 1788.

Elisha died in 1857 and it's possible that he taught McGirr the gunsmithing trade during the five years that McGirr resided in the Pratt household. However, it is my opinion that McGirr was already a learned gunsmith before his arrival in Marietta.

Sarah and Alex McGirr resided in a frame house on Front Street. Here they reared five children, Elmer who died at age 14, Eva, Lucy, and Lida. The latter two were school teachers in Marietta. One child remains unidentified. Possibly the child died at birth.



A. C. McGIRR Gunsmith 1825-1895

by
Warren Offenberger

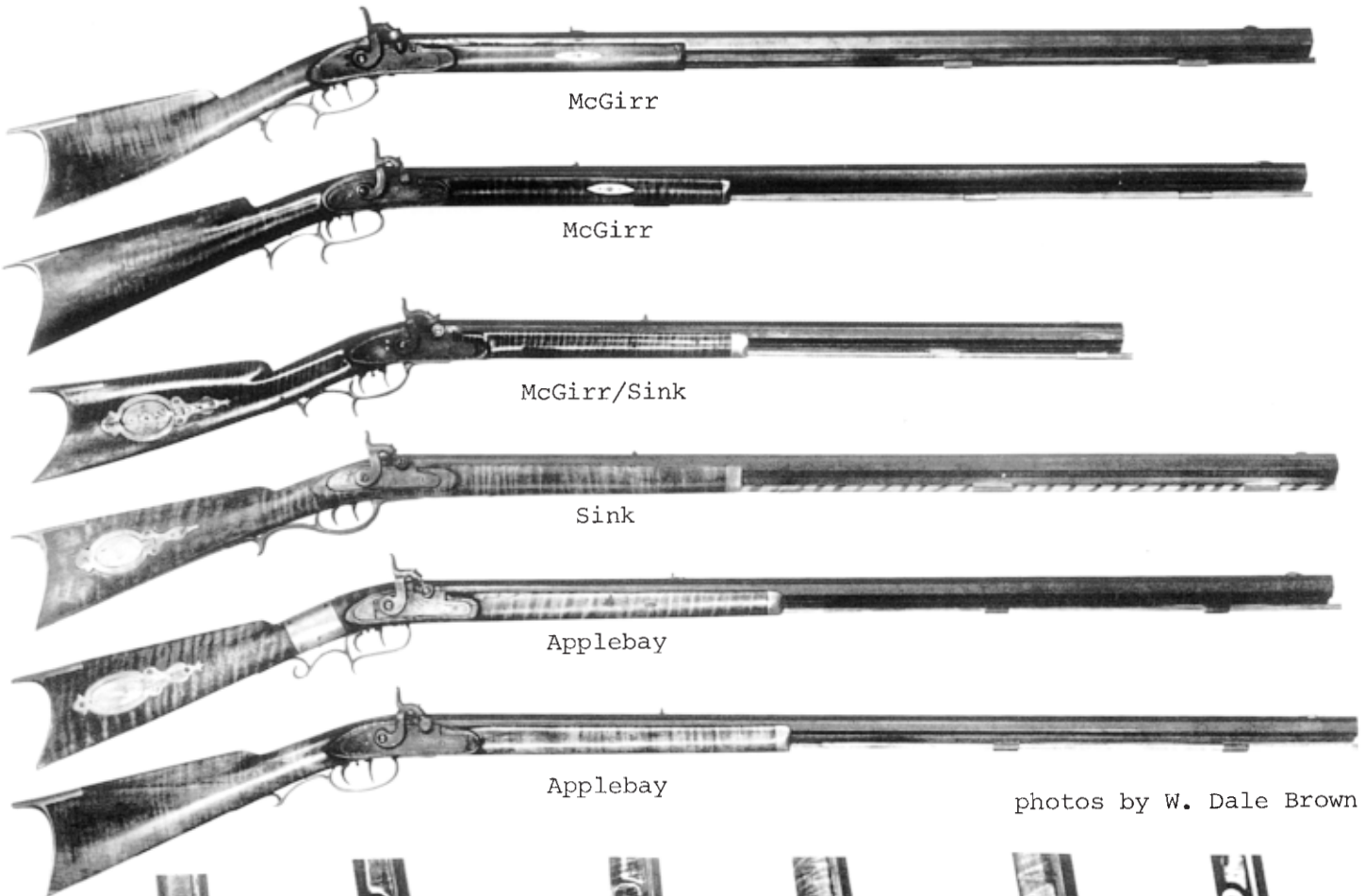


McGirr was a sergeant with the 148 Regt. of Ohio during the Civil War. While reporting for duty at the front, he was involved in a train wreck that caused curvature of the spine and paralysis of his left side during his later years of life.

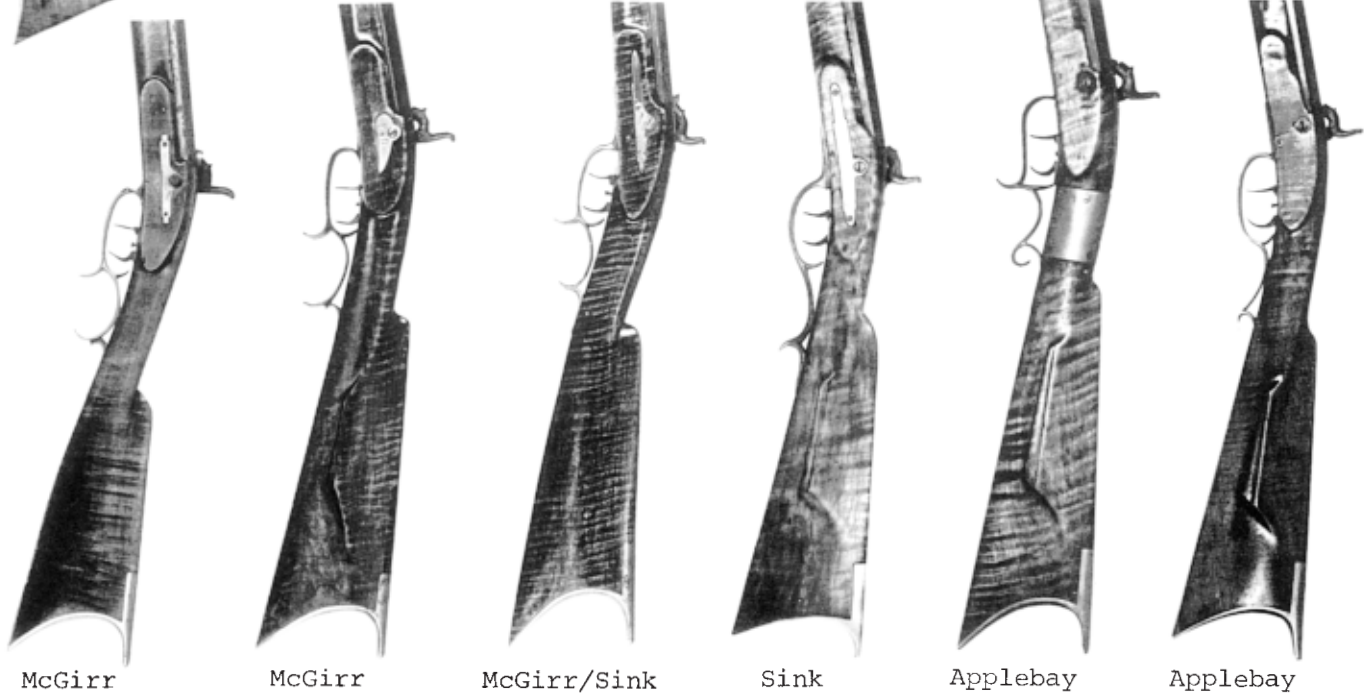
However, he seemed to survive in his gunsmithery business while other makers came and went in the city of Marietta. Marrying into a prominent family probably did not do him any harm, and his product was sound and functional and much in demand.

Numerous McGirr rifles have survived and the interesting thing about his work is that they vary so much in overall appearance. Of the 15 or so that I have examined, very few have any likeness. Either he liked to vary his work, or the varied work was from the bench of his helpers.

Two of his helpers are known, Edward Arn and David Sink. Little is known about Arn other than he is listed as a working gunsmith in Marietta 1864-1868. However, David Sink is another story. The Sink family originally came from Pennsylvania, David being born in Smicksburg in 1836. In 1850-60, he was in Cameron, Va. (W. Va.) working as a gunsmith with his father, William, and brothers John, Jacob, and Joseph. All



photos by W. Dale Brown



five were gunsmiths.

A close look at a map will illustrate that Belmont Co. and Cameron, W. Va. are but a stone's throw away from each other. I believe that Sink and McGirr knew each other before McGirr came to Marietta to set up shop. A closer look at the same

map will reveal Wellsburg, Va. (W. Va.). Here worked Alexander Applebay.

There is little or no similarity between the work of Applebay and McGirr. However, between Applebay and Sink it is almost a carbon copy. An A. Applebay is known that is dated 1856 and is a



Elisha Pratt

dead ringer for the David Sink rifle illustrated and now in the hands of a Pennsylvania collector. I believe that Sink, Applebay, and McGirr all drank from the same well and all knew each other. It is entirely possible that the elder Sink (William) taught the trade to all three.

It is also possible and probable that after the Civil War and due to McGirr's physical condition that he called on David Sink to work for him in Marietta.

All McGirr rifles are marked with two individual die stamps "A. C. McGirr" and "Marietta, Ohio" in two lines very close together. However, two rifles are known where these two lines are stamped further apart to allow another name to be stamped. "David Sink" is on one and "Ed Arn" is on the other. This proves that they were stamped with these two additional names at the time of manufacture and are not later add-on stampings.

I have found no further specimens of Arn's work. He possibly left the Ohio Valley for greener pastures. David Sink returned to Pennsylvania in 1870 where he continued to practice the trade of gunsmith. He died in Punxsutawney, Pa., June 28, 1910 while mowing the lawn. He was 74 years old and still listed as a gunsmith.

A. Applebay worked as a shantyboat gunsmith up and down the Ohio River and died at Lowell, Ohio on his birthday March 4, 1906.

Alexander McGirr expired November 1, 1895. The following obituary appeared in the local paper:

"Mr. A. C. McGirr, a resident of Marietta for 45 years and a citizen known for uprightness of character died suddenly last night at 11 o'clock of what appeared a stroke of apoplexy, following a long period of declining health. He was born in Belmont Co. and lived at the age of 70 years.

He has lived on the lot corner, Front and Wooster, and for a generation his sign was that of the Old Gun Shop, where as a faithful and honest mechanic he labored. Like the village smith, with him each morning saw some task begin, each evening saw it close.

He was a member of the Masonic Lodge who have the funeral in charge.

He leaves a wife and 3 children.

In A. C. McGirr, Marietta loses a good citizen and a kindly man who met all with a pleasant and cordial greeting."

Mrs. McGirr died in 1922 and is buried with her husband and children in Mound Cemetery in Marietta, Ohio.

One daughter, Lida (McGirr) McDonald was living around 1925. I have found no further reference to her or any living descendent.

Before closing I would like to thank the staff of Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio, for helping me uncover photos of Pratt and A. C. McGirr. The search for an existing photo of McGirr began five years ago when I began to do the McGirr research. This research included correspondence with a gentleman in Texas who has several old photo albums of early Front Street, Marietta families. Unfortunately, the photos could not be identified. The original tin types of Pratt and McGirr were discovered quite by accident at Campus Martius in 1978.

Secondly I wish to give credit to Hap Harriger of Brookville, Pa. He gladly gave me all the needed information on the Sink family and photos of the Sink rifle. For this I am most grateful. □