




# Valentine Shuler Gunsmith 1808-1885

By Don Shuler



In last years article about my great-great grandfather, John Shuler, I promised to do a sequel. At that time I mentioned my subject's uncle Valentine Shuler and gave some information on guns of his that I had seen. One year later I have a vast amount of information on Valentine and now own four of his guns.

Valentine came to Licking County, Ohio at age 8 in the year 1816. His father, John Valentine Shuler, moved his family here from Northumberland County, Pa. Valentine had three brothers, John (my great-great-great grandfather), Daniel and William. He served his apprenticeship in the Licking area but under who is a question. His earliest guns show a Ross influence, so he might have apprenticed in Zanesville. Although I've yet to find a gun Valentine made in Licking, he certainly made some prior to his removal to New Philadelphia in 1833 at age 25. One of his guns has an identical patch box head as a John I own, so they were certainly working together in Licking.

Valentine was obviously an industrious man, for in addition to gunsmithing he was part owner of a saw mill in New Philadelphia.

His one ledger covering the period of 1837-1845 shows evidence that he was training apprentices and filling orders for guns. Two ads in the Tuscarawas Advocate on Sept. 24, 1841 ran as follows:

"A JOURNEYMAN WANTED. The subscriber wishes to employ a good JOURNEYMAN GUNSMITH of well established moral character and industrious habits. Valentine Shuler, New Philadelphia, Ohio."

"GUN BARRELS - Valentine Shuler respectfully informs the public, and especially gunsmiths, that he has just received for sale a lot of GUN BARRELS of a superior quality."

His ledger lists 33 special orders during that 12 year period which I assume were custom made as opposed to guns he sold from stock. His entries showed agreed-upon price, (\$13.00 to \$25.00) number of balls to pound, barrel length, half or full stock, weight, patch box style plus any special features wanted. He made his own patented locks, so if this was desired he so noted. One interesting order called for "German Silver butt plate, eight pieces of silver, brass around

lock plate and patch box with spring hook" - Price was \$20.00!

I think Valentine, as evidenced by the four guns I own, can be classified as a fine craftsman. All four guns are different, so he expressed his artistic ability in different ways. He signed all of his guns apparently. Three that I own have Valentine Shuler on the barrel in block letters and the fourth and earliest is signed in script on the barrel and the lock plate has a script signature plus New Phila. The two that don't have his hand made lock have "R & W.C. Biddle & Co., Philadelphia" on plate.

When Valentine was 43 years old his wife of sixteen years died. Two years later he married Jane Wills who interestingly was the sister of his apprentice David Wills. An interesting tale printed in the New Philadelphia newspaper in later years told of a group of 100 men who formed there to go to Canada and fight in the Patriotic War in 1837. The article said that "The leader was David Wills, an apprentice to gunsmith Valentine Shuler, who made and repaired guns for the group."

In the year 1861, after living and working in New Philadelphia for 28 years, Valentine moved to



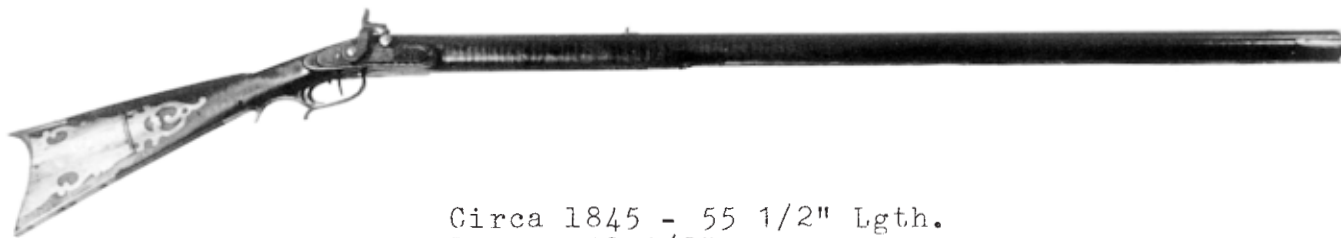
Circa 1835 - 41 3/4" Lgth.  
Barrel 26 1/2" -  
30 Cal. - Half-Stock-  
Brass mounted, including cap.  
20 silver inlays plus silver  
wire inlays.  
Handmade lock and set triggers  
Script Valentine Shuler on  
barrel. Same, plus New Phila.  
on lock plate.

Missouri with his wife and son William. He set-up shop and continued to make guns for many years. Fortunately, his records survived and his history in Missouri is well documented. One of the Valentines I have was made in Missouri. Many of its' features reflect the change from Ohio to Missouri style and he was obviously effected by the Hawkins style plains rifles that were in demand there. Valentine trained his oldest son William so I'm sure that between them they sent many-a-man on west, the proud owner of a Shuler plains rifle. William Shuler was the last of the Shuler gunsmiths, who worked in Pa., Ohio and Mo. for approx. 200 years.

Valentines long road from Pennsylvania to Licking to Tuscarawas

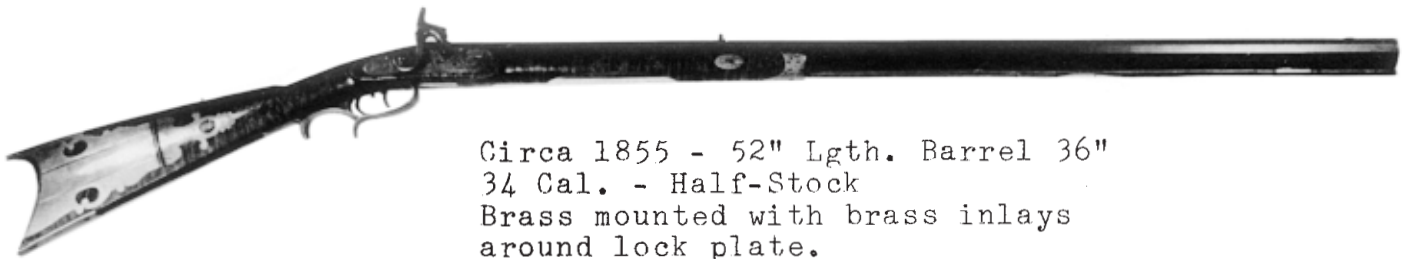
to Missouri ended on April 27, 1885 at age 76 years and 10 months. I'm sure he'd be pleased to know that we of the Ohio Longrifle Collectors care about his contribution to our heritage and will preserve his history along with other Ohio gunsmiths. □

Authors note: Special thanks and recognition is due my good friend Mr. Greg Hahn, the great-great grandson of Valentine Shuler. Greg and I are working on the Shuler geneology and his researching ability is phenomenal. He provided me with much information on Valentines life in New Philadelphia and Missouri and shared information from his journals that have survived.



Circa 1845 - 55 1/2" Lgth.  
Barrel 40 1/2"  
36 Cal. - Full Stock  
Brass mounted - Spring release  
patch box.  
Lock plate signed R. & W. C.  
Biddle & Co., Philadelphia.  
Block letter V. SHULER on, barrel.





Circa 1855 - 52" Lgth. Barrel 36"  
34 Cal. - Half-Stock  
Brass mounted with brass inlays  
around lock plate.  
Silver barrel key escutcheons,  
hunters star and forestock plate.  
Lock plate signed R. & W.C.  
Biddle & Co. Philadelphia.  
Block letter V. SHULER on barrel.



Circa 1865 - 49 1/2" Lgth.  
Barrel 33"  
34 Cal. - Half-Stock  
Brass guard, butt plate, fore  
stock plate, and toe plate. Toe  
plate engraved and pierced with  
heart, diamond, spade, club.  
Engraved silver patch box, silver  
side plate and rear thimble. Four  
barrel key escutcheons, six inlays  
on stock, six inlays at muzzle  
all in silver. Hand made V. Shuler  
patented lock, back action with  
set triggers. Block letter  
signature V. SHULER with silver  
wire bordering it.








# More On Levi Biddle

By Les Kaser



Since we wrote the story on Levi Biddle more information has become available and a picture of Levi and his wife.

For years my father and I have searched for a picture of Levi Biddle. All of the older people that had known Levi, and have since passed on, said when there was a family picture being taken, Levi would make himself scarce.

I located a great granddaughter of Levi's in Canton, Ohio, who said she had a family album, but only her grandmother was on the picture. After we finally found the picture we were surprised to find Levi on the same photo. So follow every lead in your search for information on the early Ohio gunmakers.

My good friend Warren Offenberger has obtained some very good information on George & Frederick Biddle. George was Levi's father & Frederick his uncle.



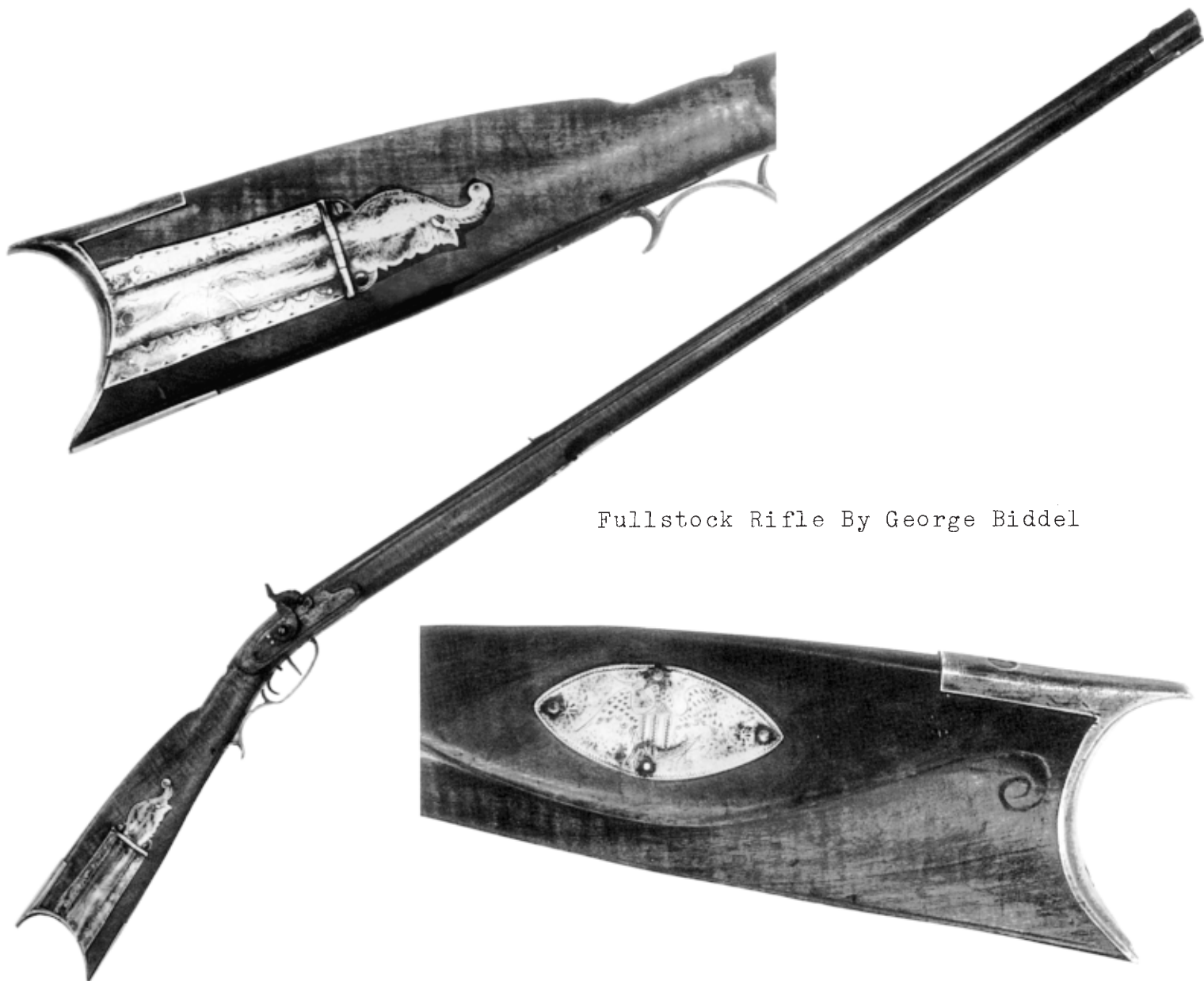
Levi and Susan Biddle

Frederick Biddle (sometimes Biddel, Bittel) is first noted in the Chambersburg, Franklin Co., Pa. records for 1805-1806 as a gunsmith. He was apprentised to Abraham Schweitzer 1769-1831 of Chambersburg. It is entirely possible that Schweitzer also taught the trade to George. The Biddles were an old Franklin Co. family. A Yost Biddel was taxed there 1791-1804 for a house, lot and cow. No occupation is given.

Frederick Biddle moved to Sugar Creek'Twp. Tuscarawas Co., Ohio in 1812.

George Biddle took over Frederick's shop for a short time. He served in the War of 1812 and moved to Tuscarawas Co. in 1815. While George was working in Pa. he ran the following ad in the Genius of Liberty newspaper.

"Reward \$5.00 ran away from the subscriber living in Bullskin Twp., on the 16th, an indentured apprentice to the gunsmithing



Fullstock Rifle By George Biddel

trade named George Kettering, 18 years of age, 5ft. tall and dark complexion. Took with him a snuff colored coat and pantaloons, a linsey round-about and pantaloons of the same. All persons are cautioned harbouring him as I am determined to put the law in force against the offending. The reward will be given to any person who will deliver him to the subscriber or lodge him in the jail at Uniontown."

It is reported that Frederick and George marked their guns in script "F.B. and G.B.". However, a rifle has recently surfaced

marked "G. Biddel" in script. The fullstock with a 42" barrel has features we normally associate with Levi's work, namely the odd shaped barrel tang, the silver engraved eagle in the cheekpiece and the elongated weeping heart inlay.

Also, the patchbox is quite similar to the box in a known Levi Biddle halfstock rifle.

It is interesting to note that Levi used the above features, that were taught to him by his father, throughout his long gunsmithing career. □

# Peter Blosser III

By Roy R. Miller and James S. Mast

Peter was born February 3, 1787 at Rockingham County, Virginia. He left Virginia for Ohio in 1825 and settled in Mahoning County near Youngstown. He died October 5, 1872.

He excelled as a gunsmith, mechanic and marksman. Family tradition says that he was a noted squirrel hunter. Not only did he make rifles, he must have used them as well.

His last rifle, the one herein illustrated, was made in 1862 for his son Abraham. It is said that he went all out to make his last rifle a masterpiece for posterity. Hence the signature on this rifle is A. Blosser rather than the normal P. Blosser which appears on most of his guns.

Upon the death of Abraham in 1901, his son Eli obtained the rifle. Later Samuel Blosser a great grandson of Peter III purchased the rifle from Eli. Thus the rifle, pouch, horn and mold remain a valued possession within the family today proving once again that the old rifle which probably remained hidden in a closet for a long period of

time is an important part of family history and a definite link with the past.

## RIFLE-DESCRIPTION

A script signature appears on the top flat of the barrel A. Blosser-1862. The overall length of the rifle is 53½". The barrel is 38" long and is 7/8" across the flats. It is of approximately .31 caliber.

This rifle contains 29 silver inlays including a large two piece silver cap box. The thumb piece and the cap box are very simply engraved while the remainder of the inlays are not engraved. All are neatly inlaid into the stock.

The stock is of plain maple with an original dark finish that has for the most part worn off during the years of its life. The dark finish would have contrasted very well with the silver on the rifle.

The rifle appears to be in excellent original condition down to the ram rod which contains a handmade cleaning jag. In conclusion, this rifle is probably the finest existing example of Peter Blosser's gunsmithing abilities. □



Halfstock Rifle By Peter Blosser III

John Traber (or Treber) was one of the first settlers to locate in Tiffin Township, Adams County, Ohio, locating there in 1796. The History of Adams County says the ancestors of the Traber family were from Holland and emigrated to this country early in the eighteenth century and settled in Maryland. Later John moved from Maryland to Lancaster, Pa.

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## John Traber Adams Co. Gunsmith (17??-1828)

By D. Lemaster



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In an interview with Ms. Grace Sprowll, the only surviving direct descendant of John Traber, she says that the family moved to this country from along the Rhine River and that the Trabers were in Lancaster possibly a generation before John was born. The county history also says that John served in the Revolution with troops from New York, but no records can now be found for a John Traber in the Revolution. Ms. Sprowll says that the original spelling of the Traber name was translated as Driver, and that John and his oldest son sometimes used the name Driver. There are records of a John Driver who served with a Lancaster battalion during the Revolution.

John Traber married a Miss Campbell in Lancaster and his son Jacob was born there in 1779. John then moved to Alleghany County,

Pa., and located on the Monongahela River, at or near the mouth of Peters Creek sometime in 1784, where he remained working at his trade, that of a gunsmith.

In 1794, he and his family came down the Ohio River in a flatboat in company with Christopher Rowine and others and "after some adventures with the Indians along the shores, arrived at Limestone (now Maysville) Ky".

Not long after the Trabers arrived at Limestone, John's wife died and is buried in a cemetery at that place.

In 1796 or 1797, he married the widow Earle and soon afterward moved all of his family to Ohio in what is now Adams County. Traber purchased 136 acres of land about 12 miles east of Maysville.

When George Sample made his first trip over Zane's Trace in 1797, he noted the fact that but two houses were on the trace from the vicinity of where West Union now stands to Chillicothe - Traber's on Lick Fork and one at the Sinking Springs, Wilcoxon's. Neither of these were, at that time, places of public entertainment.

Sometime, in 1798, John Traber asked for and received a license to operate a tavern for public entertainment. In 1798, he built a two-story log house. Afterwards it was weatherboarded, and a stone foundation was built. This log house is located on Zane's Trace (state route 41), the only road at that time from Wheeling, W.Va., to Maysville, Ky.

Many travelers found food and shelter there as the structure was large and commodious for that day. The place became known later as Travelers Rest. Such notables as Henry Clay and Gen. Andrew





John Traber's Tavern

Jackson stayed there. Jackson and his party rested there on his way to be inaugurated president in 1828.

About the same time that he built the log house (1798), John also built a gunsmith shop "where he made from the raw material, every part of a gun" and did such smith work for the farms as needed.

John Traber died about 1828 on another farm not far from the tavern.

John Traber exhibited all the characteristics of his ancestry. His complexion was fair, his eyes blue, and his hair brown. He was a very stout and physically powerful man. He could hold at arm's length a 45-pound weight suspended on his little finger, and at the same time, with a piece of chalk in his hand, write his name on the wall with perfect ease.

John Traber is one of Ohio's earliest gunsmiths, and he is one of the few early gunsmiths that we have a fair amount of information on.

I find the statement in History Of Adams County "from raw materials

he made every part of the gun", very interesting, because it raises the possibility of a gunsmith in Ohio forging barrels and locks. I questioned the fact that John Traber was forging barrels and locks since the Ohio River is so close by. Such items could easily have been brought down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh.

We know that there were many advertisements in the Pittsburgh papers offering imported gunlocks in this time period. Also by this time --and even earlier-- there were several boring mills in operation offering barrel blanks to gunsmiths. We also know that there were gunsmiths in Kentucky and Tennessee forging their own barrels at a much later date.

In the interview with Ms. Sprowll, I asked if she had any information on whether John Traber was forging barrels. Her reply was that she remembers her father, who was John Traber's great-grandson, saying that his grandfather Jacob worked for a while with his father making gun barrels. Jacob said one day, while working at the forge, a man came to see John because he had a sore on his leg which wouldn't heal and he thought John could cure him. John told him he could do nothing, but the man insisted that he could if he wanted to. John finally told the man to put his leg on the anvil, then he heated the end of a gun barrel red hot and touched it to the sore which cauterized it, and later it healed over.

I hope further research will prove whether John Traber was indeed forging his own barrels.

To date, no rifles have turned up signed by John Traber. Hopefully one day a rifle will show up with his signature on it. Ms. Sprowll said she heard of a rifle by John that was owned by a descendant of Joel Traber, John's youngest son, sometime about 1912

to 1918.

I think if such a rifle does show up, it may very well show a strong resemblance to Lancaster guns of this period. I feel this because John lived in Lancaster for a long while, and family tradition says he apprenticed there. We know he married there and his first son Jacob was born there. When he

moved to the Monongahela, he was already established and working at "his trade, that of gunsmithing"

John Traber merits further study because he was one of Ohio's earliest gunsmiths. By studying the information on John Traber, we begin to get a very good picture of an early Ohio gunsmith. □



## "Ole Joe" Returns Home

Strange incidents, or quirks of fate, that happen to our gun collecting fraternity, never cease to amaze me. Such an incident happened last year between A.O.L.R.C. member Ralph Parks of La Porte City, Iowa and William B. Skipton of the same state. The chance meeting between these two gentlemen reveals an interesting story as told to me by Mr. Skipton.

Willis Dana Skipton, William's grandfather, left West Marietta, Washington Co. Ohio somewhere between 1870-1880 and journeyed to the state of Iowa. Apparently he liked the new area for he soon returned to Ohio, took his future bride, Effie Farmer, and his mother and father back to Iowa where they settled.



He also took with him his muzzle-loading rifle, named "Ole Joe", his hunting bag, horn and all the accoutrements. From the time it left Ohio, until 1982, "Ole Joe" and accessories had been passed down thru the Skipton family from father to son; all kept intact and in good condition. Examination revealed the rifle to be a .46 cal. half stock made by Washington Co. Ohio gunsmith John Vincent.

The accoutrements include hunting bag, powder horn, cap horn, powder measure, caps, mould, a black-

smith made patch knife and a matching belt knife. The belt knife is a large Bowie type marked on the brass guard "A. HUSTEAD". It is interesting to note that a Mr. Hustead (no occupation given) was living just two blocks from the Skipton residence in West Marietta. It is possible that he was a blacksmith and was the maker of matching patch and belt knives.

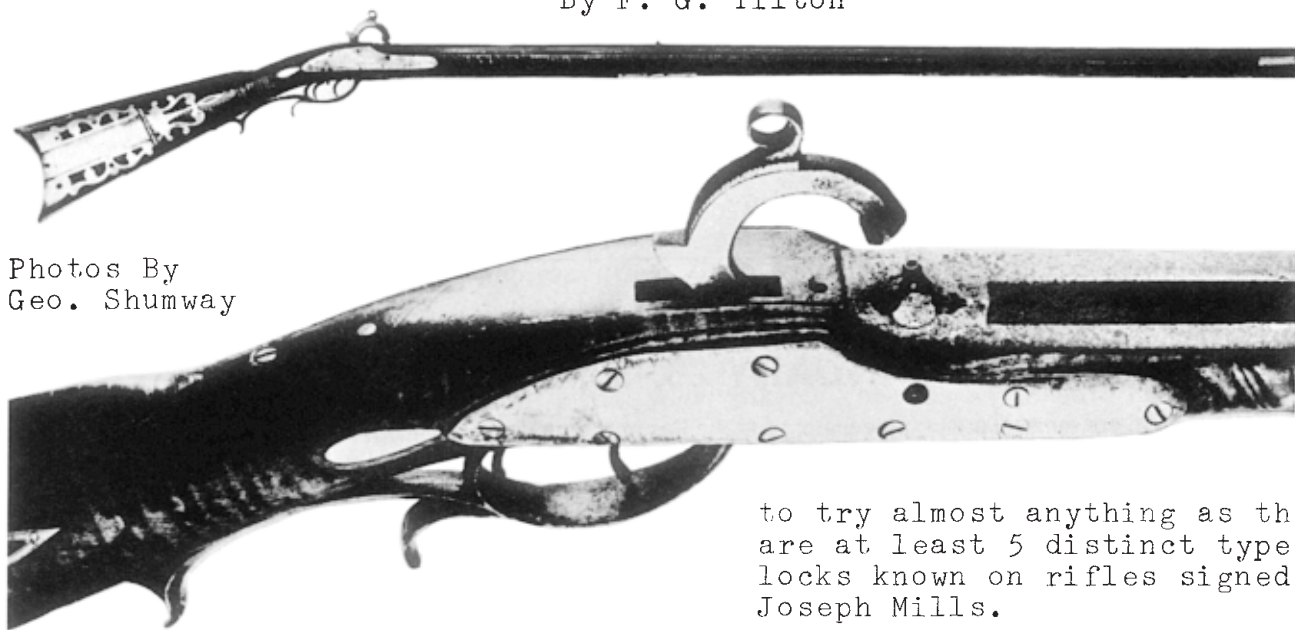
I'm grateful to Mr. Skipton and fellow member Ralph Parks for allowing me to bring "Ole Joe" back home to Washington County. □

Warren Offenberger



## Joseph Mills

By F. G. Tilton



Photos By  
Geo. Shumway

Joseph Mills was born in Pennsylvania in 1790 and died in Perry Twp., Coshocton Co. Ohio on Sept. 8, 1876. He had moved from Colerain Twp., Bedford Co. Pa. to Ohio in 1823. He bought a farm consisting of 76 acres in Perry Twp. and lived there as a farmer, blacksmith and gunsmith until his death.

As a gunsmith he was an inventor/innovator and evidently not afraid

to try almost anything as there are at least 5 distinct types of locks known on rifles signed by Joseph Mills.

The first type is a flintlock. The style of the lock, patchbox style, and relief carving suggest the rifle was made while he was still in Bedford Co., Pa.

The second type is a percussion with a distinct Bedford type hammer. It could have possibly been made after he came to Ohio.

The third type is completely different and quite unusual in

itself. The rifle is beautiful, long and slender, with a 45 1/8" barrel of .43 caliber. The lock is a box lock having a center swung hammer of an unusual shape. It is curved and almost 2/3 of a circle. The thumbpiece is forged from the hammer and curled into a tight circle. The lock plate, which lies on top of the wrist has the flowing script initials "J. M." inlaid in brass. The cheekpiece inlay is of silver and has a nicely engraved eagle. The teardrop inlays on each side of the wrist are also of silver. The rest of the furniture is of brass.

There is a fair amount of carving, both raised and incised on both sides of the buttstock plus a triangle of crosshatched incised checkering under the cheekpiece. The beautifully engraved patchbox is of brass with eleven piercings. The sideplates are of brass, crosshatched with lines and secured with nine brass screws.

The fourth type of lock is on a halfstock owned by Dr. James

Whisker. It has a beautiful piece of wood and again a different type of lock. The main spring is mounted on the outside of the lock plate connecting directly to the strange shaped hammer. The tail of the lockplate again shows the Bedford Co. influence.

The fifth type is another unusual lock. It is a box lock with a center swung bar hammer. Inscribed on the barrel flat in script is "Joseph Mills 1859, My 355th gun, made in my 70th year." Quite an inscription and also quite unusual.

There were 8 rifles, 8 shotguns plus 2 pistols sold at a public sale after Mill's death. I wonder how many of these rifles had a variant of the locks that we now know.

It has been said that greatness in a gunsmith was when he could vary his work while retaining his individuality and identity. Joseph Mills fits the mould and surely makes his mark as one of the great gunsmiths to grace this world of ours. □