



# Black Swamp Gunsmith John Baer

James S. and Bernadine Beck Mast  
November 2002

John Baer (May 5, 1837 – January 30, 1928) was the maker of percussion rifles in Fulton County Ohio and lived on a farm near the small village of Pettisville located in Fulton County. While those who collect the early rifles knew the J. B. rifles were from Northwest Ohio, John Baer seemed to have eluded the researchers who were documenting Ohio Gunsmiths. The relatives and community knew all along who the J. B. gunsmith was. This then is part of their story.

Samuel and Elizabeth Martin Baer migrated with their six children from eastern Pennsylvania to Wayne County, Ohio enroute to Elkhart County, Indiana. Samuel was a wheelwright by trade. The family arrived in Fulton County where Elizabeth became ill and died at the age of 37. Of necessity, the journey ended in Fulton County, Ohio which is about 125 miles east of the anticipated destination of Elkhart, Indiana. The farm which Samuel Baer homesteaded in 1841 remains in the Baer family today. However, at the time, raising small children alone was a hardship for father Samuel, so the children were placed in foster homes with neighbors and friends – not an unusual solution at the time. Parent/child relationships were maintained. John Baer was reared by the Manatres initially and then by a King family in the community. Samuel and wife Elizabeth were of the Lutheran faith. Both are buried in the Beck Cemetery on CR 22. The Kings with whom John was placed were Amish and John would unite with their faith and later become Amish-Mennonite as did succeeding descendants of pioneer families. No Amish settlement remained in the Archbold, Ohio area.

John married Catherine Nafziger (June 27, 1846 – January 30, 1925) on March 8, 1866. To this marriage were born 5 children.



John Baer and his wife Catherine Nafziger Baer

- Magdalena (1867-1933) married 1)
- Daniel J. Wyse, 2) Isaiah Zaerr
- Mary (1869 – 1908) married Menno Wyse
- Caroline (1871 –1900) married Fred N. Yedica
- Lydia (1873 – 1944) married Jacob Grieser
- Joseph (1877- 1950) married Katie E. Schrock

John and Catherine Baer were members of the Central Amish Mennonite Church. They are buried in the Pettisville Cemetery.

John apparently was very skilled with his hands and made blanket chests, cupboards and other pieces of furniture in addition to the percussion rifles. He was a farmer, a woodworker and general handyman. He repaired boots, shoes and harnesses for neighbors during farming's slow time – winter. He also repaired



Halfstock rifle by John Baer

furniture, wagons and farm tools. Another endeavor was the sale of wooden handles for tools including hammers, hatchets, axes which were sold by merchants in Archbold. His precision and attention to detail were as evident in his hatchet and hammer handles as in his fine furniture and gunsmithing. It is not known under whom he might have apprenticed to learn the details of rifle making and carving, engraving and metal work in brass and silver. A neighbor, Minister Christian Beck who emigrated from Switzerland in 1832 was a blacksmith/locksmith who brought a large amount of such equipment when the family emigrated could perhaps have provided some of the equipment for such a shop. Likewise, John's father who was a wheel right would have had some of these tools as well.

No information has been handed down as to John's gun making production. We assume though, that the production was rather limited. Not a large number of his guns can be found today. But of course, we must remember that Northwest Ohio was the last area of Ohio to be settled in 1834, more than 45 years after settlement at Marietta, Ohio. Few early area gunsmiths were making rifles and much of the trade would soon be taken over by factory made percussion and breech loading arms. John used both a script J. B. and a block print J. B. to sign his rifles. Walnut seems to be chosen most times for the guns made to order for community hunters. Oral family history states he earned 50 cents per day as a carpenter, while one of his plain guns sold for seven dollars.

He was also a hunter and skilled marksman. According to Clarence Baer, John's grandson, the grandchildren were permitted to spend time in Grandpa's gunshop but they were expected to sit quietly and watch. Sometimes Clarence would be given a bit of lumber, a hammer and a few nails to practice. He remembers making several birdhouses under Grandfather's tutelage.

Several old photos show parts of the old gun shop which no longer exists. Many of the



Leather coin purse given to John Baer by the Indians

tools were saved by family members and have been displayed in the Sauder Farm Museum on CR E just north of Archbold.

The family recalls that John sometimes wore wooden shoes as was customary for some of the early settlers and their descendants.

John once traveled (probably using the canal for most of the journey) to Medway, Ohio which is in Clark County between Dayton and Springfield, for plans for a gambrel roof barn. These ridged roofs had two slopes on each side with the lower slope having the steeper pitch. Such were to become the barn style of choice for the large structures built in the Archbold area. These termed "hip roof" barns replaced the older style described as Pennsylvania barns. Both



John Baer's workshop on display at Sauder Farm Museum

contained large mows of hay storage and a central threshing floor. Many were banked to provide area for cattle at the lower level. John made the hand drawn shingles for the first such barn constructed in the area. The barn on his own farm was a replacement, as fire destroyed the first barn. The second barn was placed on the first foundation.

John was known throughout the community as one who had good judgment and he would often entertain visitors who came to him seeking advice on general matters of life. He was a quiet man who spoke little but made his words count for the good of his community. His native tongue was German, but he learned to converse in English and French-the languages of early N W Ohio. He also counted among his friends Native Americans in the region. He once traveled with some of them during the Lincoln-Douglas debates. After traveling with them, he was given a deerskin jacket and a leather coin purse. The coin purse remains in Laura Baer's possession today. It is similar to other leather wallets surviving from the Fulton County area settlers.

During his later years, the gunsmith became blind. He still enjoyed being taken into the woods by his grandson Clarence who was instructed to sit very still so the sounds of the woods could be heard since sight was no longer possible. Both John and his son Clarence lived on the farm purchased by their father and grandfather Samuel Baer in 1841.

A question which remains unanswered for descendants today is whether (or how) these Baers are relatives of the Bear/Bare gunsmiths of Pennsylvania.

Much of the historic Baer story was shared by Laura Baer, widow of Grandson Clarence Baer. She currently resides in Fairlawn Nursing Complex. Her recall of these events and her willingness to share photos and stories made the interviews, correspondence and phone calls a delight. Photos are from the Baer family.

Additional information came from the local paper, The Archbold Buckeye and Grieser and Beck's local history entitled Out of the wilderness published in 1960



# Caleb Vincent Letters



Early Photo of John Caleb Vincent

Although Washington Co. Ohio gunsmith John Caleb Vincent had recently lost his wife and his health was failing, he continued to work at his trade until his death in 1918. Twenty-eight letters written in Caleb's hand to W. C. Niceswanger survive and give us an account of his work and activities. Thanks to Don Hutslar for providing typed copies for publication.

WEO



Early photo of W. C. Niceswanger

Vincent O. Jan. 17, 1912

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,  
Dear Sir: --

The Small rifle is nearing completion, and both rifles will be finished by Tuesday, 16, Jan. Price of small gun \$8.75, other one \$1.50. My income for work on small rifle is but a fraction above \$1.00 per day. Am sure you will be satisfied with the work.

Yours respectfully  
J. C. Vincent

Jan. 19, '12

Mr W. C. Niceswanger  
Dear Sir:

I have received the amount in full for work on these two rifles. Please accept thanks for same, and the many jobs of work sent to me. The small rifle will require thin patching. You will find extra tube in patch-box.

Yours respectfully  
J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Sept. 27, 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

Yours of 24, Sept. received. I had the breech of the automatic gun, which is not marred, and have mailed it as requested. No charge for postage. I have got along with my work rather better than was expected. Am getting somewhat reconciled to my loss which seemed to rob me of a great part of my ambition, but have concluded that whatever will divert my mind into some other channel, is best, and work probably is the very best. I shall begin work on one of the rifles you sent, this week and get them along as fast as I can. My daughter will go to her home about next week which will leave me alone, and that of course will make my working time some shorter, but maybe not so very much.

Your respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent, O. Oct. 16, 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Sir:--

And friend:--Both rifles will be finished by Thursday, Oct. 21. Am in hopes the roads will be in good condition so you can come out and take a look at our neighborhood.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Nov. 2, 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

Yours of 1. Nov. received. I have Mr George's rifle repaired, but have not made a beginning on the others, but shall soon. Since you was here considerable work has come in and I suppose i'm in duty bound to do this work next after yours already in, so I cannot make a date for anything more, but just do my best.

Yours respectfully,

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Nov. 11. 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

I went over to look at the Miller rifle, and find it weighs eleven pounds, much more than I thought. The size of bore about 160, length 36 inches. It will not suit you on account of the weight. It has a fine stock, but there are some scratches on sholder of stock. Vincent is quite a nice little village, and I found some improvements since I had been in the eastern part. If the thought had struck me when you was here, I would have you go to the upper porch of the house where the field could have been pointed out where the Chesterhill ball team "flayed" the Marietta team about 25 or 26 years ago. The occasion was a picnic given by the Knights of St. George. The crowd was estimated at 3000. I owned the field at that time where the game was played. The rifle can be bought for \$15.00

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Nov. 15, 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

Yours of 16.Nov. received. I take all the blame for Mr George's light bullets. While testing the rifle I found the bullets were rather small so I cherried the molds some more, but didn't mold any more bullets. I was so sure they would be just right. You know if a bullet starts ever so tight, it goes the balance of the way very easily. I know his gun is even inside as I always see that the bolt is not worn opposite the plane, otherwise the bore might become slightly smaller towards the muzzle, or rather right at the muzzle. All he will need to send will be the molds and I will reduce the size. About the 22 rifle you mention. I used to enlarge to rim fire 25, but have no tool for chambering a 25-20, but really have quit the whole business, for I couldn't make it pay both customer and myself.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Dec 21, 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger

Dear Friend:--

Am sending your double gun by mail. It comes to \$1.50 including postage. Your rifle barrel landed about 30 minutes ago, by its appearance I think it is about what you have been looking for. I am still busy.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Dec.25. 1915

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

Yours of 23, inst., with remittance enclosed received. I thank you. I believe I understand just how you want that rifle made up, and if my health and strength hold out I shall probably make a beginning on gun the Monday following New Year. I have recently lost about two weeks with sickness, but the cause is removed now, but so far I have to take a resting spell of two or three hours each afternoon, but am now eating like a sawmill hand, and soon expect to be well. I received a letter this wekk from B. W. Niceswanger of Ringgold O. who says he has started a rifle to me which needs new stock and other repairs. He probably is a relative of yours. If you are having a Merry Christmas to day, it must be indoors, but I trust you are having it just the same, and that you will meet a Happy New Year.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Jan. 12, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

I shall Express your new rifle to Stockport, care Chesterhill dock, not later than Tuesday, 18. Jan. When your last letter came the barrel was finished but I will explain that after cutting piece off breech just enough to take off all the breech-burn and no more, I planed the lands so if any flaws were inside they would be seen, and there was one on one land which was quite deep and entirely across the land, and to cut it off right there, which was surely necessary, it left the barrel  $38\frac{1}{4}$  inches. The barrel now is perfect as a new one. I will box the rifle to insure safety. Will make the extra pair of molds to go along.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent



Vincent O. Jan. 24, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger:

Dear Friend,

Yours of 21. Jan. with money order for \$11.50 enclosed received. This is the amount in full for rifle just sent to you. I not only thank you for the remittance, but include your kindly expressed satisfaction with the job. Since old age has overtaken me I worry a great deal from the time I commence a piece of shop work until finished, and then am sure I could have done better if a little more pains had been taken. If my living depended mainly on my work since slow time has taken hold of me, also an abnormal appetite, I think two meals a day would be the extant of what I could stand. Well this is mostly gush, but then I am slow and getting slower. I thank you sincerely for the patronage you have given me for these many many years.

Very respectfully yours

J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Feb 5. 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger:

Dear Friend:-- Yours of 2. Feb. received. I truly appreciate your kind words of satisfaction with my work. The Enoch Miller rifle that was for sale here in Vincent, was sold Tuesday of this week. A Marietta man was the buyer. I am very willing to rebuild the rifle you have specified in your letter but O! the time when it can be done I am afraid will be a long one, but will not be put off for any reason except on account of the jobs already on hand. Mr Niceswanger's and Mr Smith's guns came the same day, and I have promised to do the same kind of a job for a W. Va. man soon, but it is not here yet, but in all probability will be soon. And, by the way, his name is John D. E. Huffman, and he writes if I want to know anything about him you can tell me, but this is not necessary, for when a rifle is in condition that it may be used no other guarantee is needed. I shall do my best for you, but it may be pretty well along in the Spring when I can get the rifle done. I find my endurance is somewhat on the wane, but the will holds out reasonably well.

Yours respectfully, J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Apr. 7, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear friend:-- Yours of 4. Apr. received. I will have rifle and the other jobs ready to start on their journey next week, may be a little past the middle of the week. I dug up my last plank for the stock and had been worrying lest it would not be up to standard, but to my surprise it is number one, and now I regret I didn't know this in time to have put one from this plank on your light rifle. Enough maple for about eight more stocks will be the finish, and three rifles in the shop to have new stocks. I made a very neat box in which I sent Mr. B. W. Niceswanger's rifle and paid the postage without cost to him and requested him to return the box by parcel post which he agreed to, then last week I again reminded him of it, but up to now have not received it. I made it long enough for your rifle expecting to use it for same. I put the cover on with screws which is an improvement over nails. I will send rifle by parcel post, as requested.

Very truly yours, J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Apr. 13. 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,

Dear Friend:--

Yours of 10. Apr. received. He would be an odd sort of workman who would want his business to stop, so if you send more work to me I shall expect to do my best to do good work for you, but as to time it will be hard to tell further than I shall expect to do my best. I have made a count of the guns in for repairs, and 12 is the number, three to be furnished with new stocks, two of them will have to be attended to about the next. The rifle just finished to your order will go out this morning, the box having arrived just in time. The stock is fully up to expectations, and shall furnish one for you just as good if you send one for that purpose. My maple has dwindled down to not more than 7 or 8 stocks, and then what. The price on this rifle I am sending to you is \$10.70, and the wrench, tubes, cups and repairing lock \$1.80. Mr Huffman wrote he would not have time to come after his rifle, so I sent it as requested. He wanted to shoot some Ohio groundhogs. Mr Chambers' gun landed here last week.

As ever, your friend, J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. Apr. 29, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger  
Sharpsburg, O.

Dear Friend,--

I concluded not to write until I knew what to say. Have been working twelve hours a day for the last three weeks, and am thinking of going on strike for an eleven hour day, but will stick to the twelve until your job is finished, which, I am very sure now, that it can be accomplished by the time you mentioned, 15. May, if my working power holds out. I think it will for it seems to be on the increase. I think the fish have all been caught, so that is off my mind.

Yours respectfully  
J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. May 17. 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,  
Sharpsburg, O.

Dear Friend,

Yours of 15. May. with \$11.75, the amount in full for work on rifle, received, and for which I thank you sincerely. O! what a satisfaction it is to do work for a friend who is and has always been satisfied with my work. I realize that in some of my work done within a few years is not quite up to the standard of 20 years ago, but people like yourself, who know my age, will not be surprised at that, and give me the glad hand of human fellowship. My blessing on all such dear friends. I have had some experiences myself that have happened on a day when most folks went to meeting, one especially when three of us took an afternoon walk, and ran on to the largest black snake I ever saw, and one of my companions fired at its head and missed, but my bullet found the very center of its head, and so far as I know, the only bad luck in the case happened to the snake. I am very thankful for the box and will need it soon, and as I train with the old style people am sending the amount of the postage. I have about six weeks work in the shop, but am tidying up the premises which was much needed, also planting my garden, and about next week expect to take that fishing excursion. I am sorry for the fish, but I like them. I hope that Birthday Anniversary was a pleasant occasion. On my 75 Anniversary, which occurred the 21. last March my friends gave me a "shower" of 68 cards.

As ever, your friend  
J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. June 19, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,  
Sharpsburg, O.

Dear Friend:--

The rifle will leave here this morning in the same box, and of course it will go West this time. I have included everything you asked for except melting ladle and would have made that willingly but had nothing in the shop to make it of, or any device to shape it in. In Montgomery Ward and Company's Catalog I find you can get one for 14¢, probably postage will add something. It will be 3 in. and the number is 2C860. The price on this rifle is \$18.00. I have near two months work in the shop, four of the rifles require new stocks. My premises very much resemble a meadow for I have not had time to mow the grass.

Very respectfully yours  
J. C. Vincent

Vincent O. June 22. 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger, Sharpsburg, O.  
Dear Friend,

Yours of 20, June, with check for \$18.00, the amount in full for rifle received. Thank you. It keeps me in health and good spirits when my customers express their satisfaction with my work, and I remember these things longer than anything else that could be said or written. That fishing trip has not come off yet, and as it is getting rather late, two of us are talking about groundhogs, but am very sure the "combination" will not match your one day record, but getting out in the fresh air will be worth lots to me. Work now in will keep me busy for the next six weeks at least.

Your respectfully  
J. C. Vincent

Vincent, O. Sept. 13, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,  
Sharpsburg O.

Dear friend, Yours received. Gun also. I have looked the rifle over and am sure I can make it look respectable without making new stock. I have put plates on many a one where the wood was in worse condition. The time when it can be put in repair is where my worry comes in. I have mentioned to a few of my customers partly at random and partly in earnest that I would probably wind up the gun business in about one more year, and "heavens" what a nest I stirred up. Guns have been pouring in by the wagon load. It will hardly be possible to come near a promise on the time when this job can be done, but sometime in Oct. Will do my best. I shall expect a picture of the biggest victim of your rifle, and my best wishes for good luck go with you.

Very respectfully yours

J. C. Vincent

Vincent, O. Oct. 2, 1916

Mr W. C. Niceswanger,  
Sharpsburg, O.

Dear friend:--

I sent triggers in seperate cover. No charge. I am going to try hard to have Mr Sands' rifle repaired this week so it can go while there will be a train on our road, which stops on the 10. Oct. I shall hope for good roads so you can get out here. Shall certainly enjoy the visit.

Yours respectfully

J. C. Vincent

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE)