

Tim Williams

Rifles that put meat on the pole...

by Michael Beliveau
with photography by Ric Lambert



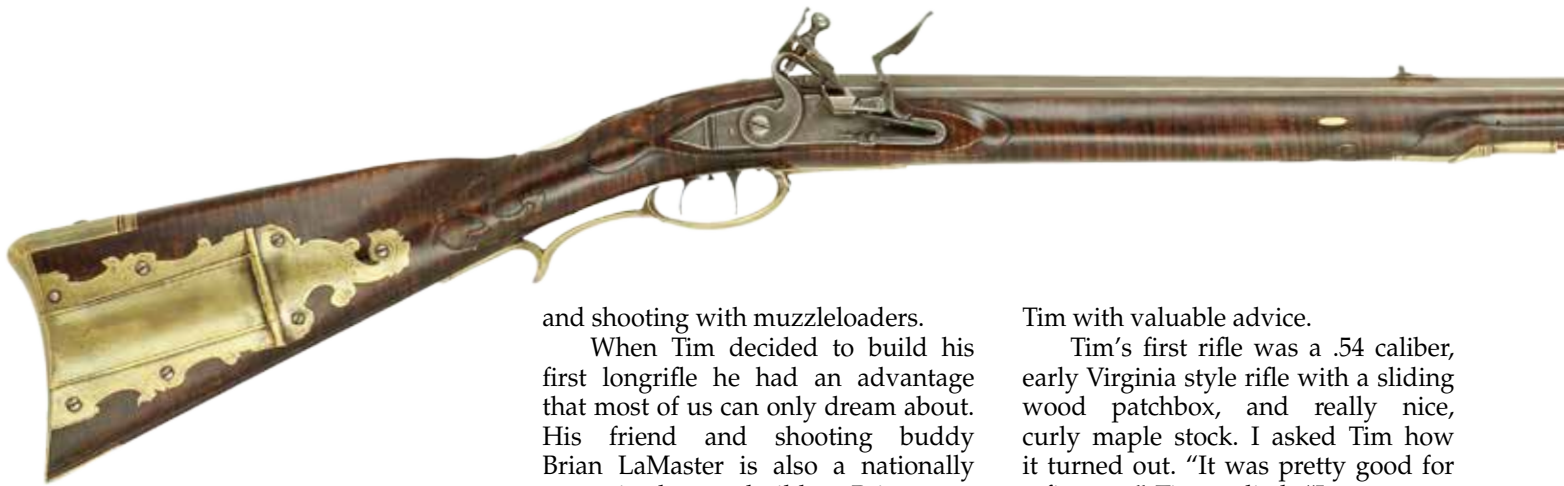


Tim Williams built a pair of mirror image .54 caliber rifles for the Tennessee husband and wife team Stephen and Laura Gove. The rifles are built in the style of Adam Haymaker of Winchester, Virginia. Stephen's rifle is left handed while Laura's is right handed. These mirror image rifles provide a unique opportunity to see the details on both sides of a gun at the same time. The brace of companion pistols are also built in Haymaker's style. Tim mimicked the tang carving of the rifles on the pistols using silver wire inlay.

“THE ONLY INTERESTING RIFLES are accurate rifles.” Those are the words of Col. Townsend Whelen, who was perhaps the best outdoor writer of the twentieth century. But those same words could easily be attributed to longrifle builder Tim Williams. Tim is a dedicated flintlock hunter who expects the guns he builds to

reliably put meat on the pole.

As I was talking to Tim, he was working on a York County rifle for himself. He was building a .58 caliber rifle based on an original, 1770s rifle made by York County gunsmith George Schreyer. Tim plans to use it for a moose hunt. As it turns out, moose is just one of the few major North American game animal that Tim hasn't harvested.



I remarked that .58 was a pretty big bore for moose. I told Tim that my friend, and fellow gun builder, David Price took the New Hampshire state record moose with a .54 caliber gun. Tim acknowledged that a .54 will take most anything on four legs, but when he shot a buffalo, he used a .54 caliber gun, and he found himself wishing he'd brought a .58. So, when he goes for moose, he's going to pack a .58, just to be sure.

Tim told me, "I've taken everything from squirrels to buffalo with flintlock rifles that I've built myself. For the last fourteen years I've hunted with nothing else."

Tim's dedication to hunting with muzzleloaders is even more impressive when you consider that he resisted the siren call of black powder shooting for many years. Tim's good friend, Brian LaMaster, tried to interest him in shooting muzzleloaders, but Tim resisted. Finally, after 10 years, Brian convinced Tim to shoot a flintlock rifle, and, as has happened to so many of us, with his first scent of aromatic gun smoke, Tim was hooked for life.

It wasn't long before shooting muzzleloaders led to a desire to build muzzleloaders. Tim had long felt an affinity to eighteenth century craftsmanship. Before becoming a professional gun maker, Tim's profession was home building. During a trip to colonial Williamsburg as a young man he developed a fascination with eighteenth century architecture. Tim started incorporating those colonial period designs into houses he built, and, as he did, he became more interested in the history of the era. Building flintlock guns became a natural direction for Tim to travel. It melded his interests in eighteenth century history and craftsmanship with his new found love of hunting

and shooting with muzzleloaders.

When Tim decided to build his first longrifle he had an advantage that most of us can only dream about. His friend and shooting buddy Brian LaMaster is also a nationally recognized gun builder. Brian was happy to advise Tim as he worked on his first rifle. Brian became Tim's gun-building mentor, and he still provides

Tim with valuable advice.

Tim's first rifle was a .54 caliber, early Virginia style rifle with a sliding wood patchbox, and really nice, curly maple stock. I asked Tim how it turned out. "It was pretty good for a first try," Tim replied. "I was pretty happy with how it turned out, and I took a few deer with that gun."

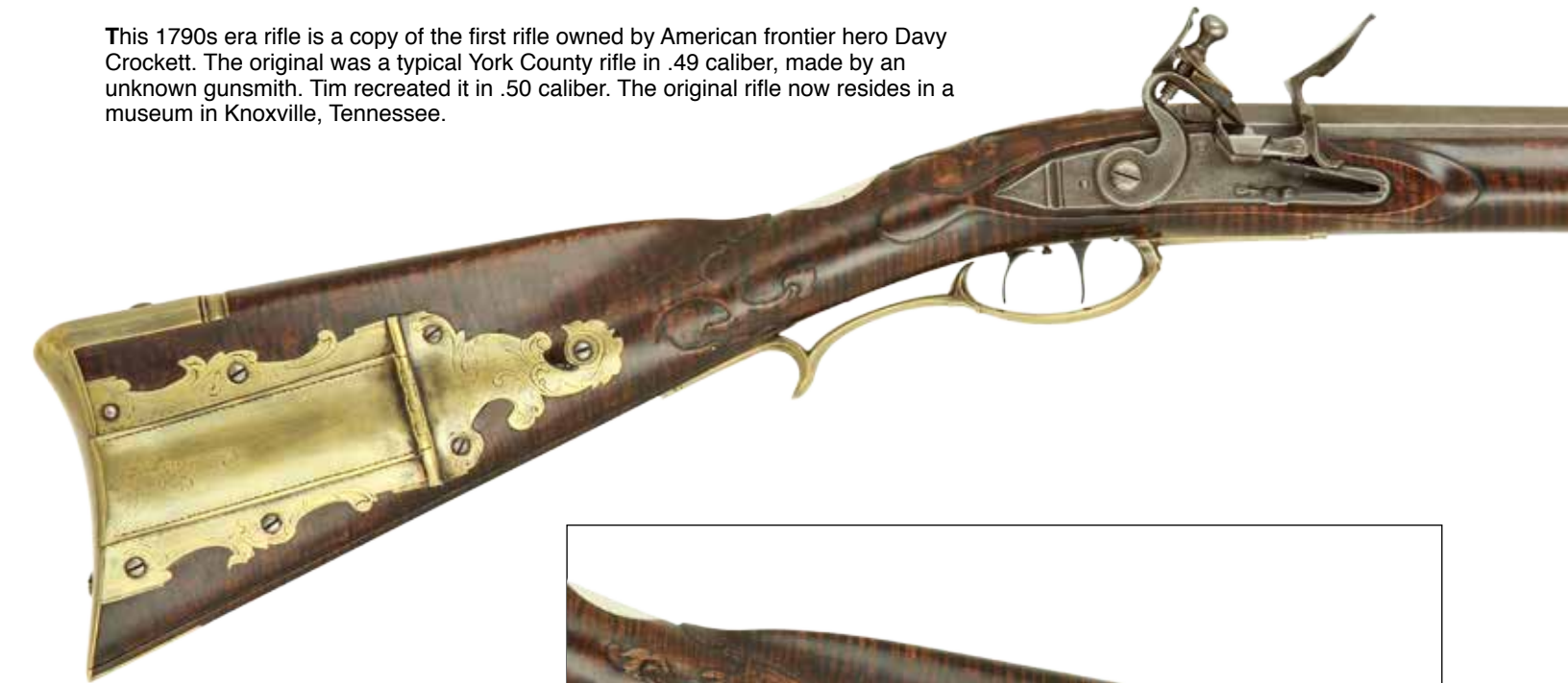
The problem with building a gun

TIM WILLIAMS





This 1790s era rifle is a copy of the first rifle owned by American frontier hero Davy Crockett. The original was a typical York County rifle in .49 caliber, made by an unknown gunsmith. Tim recreated it in .50 caliber. The original rifle now resides in a museum in Knoxville, Tennessee.



Davy Crockett supposedly bought this fine rifle for about \$18 in 1803 when he was 17 years old. Three years later he traded the rifle, along with a promise of three months labor, back to the man he'd bought it from in exchange for a horse that he could use to court his future wife, Polly Finley. The patchbox is a typical York County design with unique relief carving on the butt stock, and relief carved fleur d'elise molding around the tang.



Tim built an exact recreation of the Jon Schreit original rifle with an interesting mix of both relief and incised carving. The original rifle is one of the earliest known American-made longrifles.





Tim's recreation of the Jon Schreit original is from a 1760s transitional rifle with features of both German Jaeger rifles and of fully developed American longrifles. It has the stepped wrist of a Jaeger rifle as well as the graceful 44-inch long, swamped .50 caliber barrel of a classic long rifle.



Here you can see the delicate engraving used on the trigger guard of Tim's recreation of a Jon Schreit rifle. Each of the brass mounts on this rifle was meticulously hand-engraved as was the original, including the ramrod thimbles.

that successfully harvests game, is that all your buddies want to buy it from you. Tim couldn't seem to hold on to his personal guns for long. But, it did give him an excuse to build another, and another...Tim still can't keep his personal rifles for much beyond one hunting season.

I asked Tim what he thinks of his first rifle these days.

"I haven't seen that gun for awhile," Tim replied, "But I've seen a couple of my other early guns, and you always see the things you'd do differently today. It's not that they aren't good guns, but every day you learn something new. My work today is a lot more refined in the details than the guns I made the first couple of years."

Tim's growth as a gun maker is something he credits to the influence of Brian LaMaster. One of the most important things Brian did for Tim was to expose him to original flintlock guns. As Tim says, "It's easier to

recreate the feel of an original gun, if you can actually hold the original gun. They are so smooth, and the lines just seem to flow. Actually holding an original is a lot better than working from a picture. In a way, you can see better with your hands than you can with just your eyes."

In Tim's view, correct architecture is the most important factor in building a proper eighteenth century gun. "Of course, you have to make some adjustments so the rifle fits the shooter," Tim says. You can't shoot well with a gun that doesn't fit you." That's why he likes to personally meet the person he's building a gun for. He wants to make sure the gun will fit, and that it will be suitable for the purposes the owner intends to put it to.

In Tim's opinion, that has always been important. "A gun has to fit, and it has to work...every time," Tim said. "In 1770 when a man bought a gun and headed off to the frontier, if the gun failed, that man died." It may

not be life and death today, but Tim approaches fit and reliability as if lives are still in the balance.

When Tim is building a gun, he likes to personally meet with the client. He feels it's important to understand what a person plans to do with the gun, whether it will hang on the wall as a prized possession, or be used competitively, or if it will be carried deep into the back country for extended hunts. "You really get to know a person when you build them a gun," Tim explains. "And that's part of what keeps it interesting."

Tim is drawn to the earlier rifles of the 1760s through the 1780s. "There is something about those guns that just feels right," he said. That's why he likes to build guns that replicate a particular original as closely as possible. As Tim says, the best builders of the eighteenth century, like Isaac Berlin, John Shuler or George Schreyer, were at the top of their game. It is hard enough for him to equal their work, let alone

Tim makes most of the furnishings for the rifles he builds.

Tim says, "People will ask me why I spend so much time making small parts like nose caps, when I could save time and money by just buying them.

"Sure," he says, "I could buy a mass produced brass nose cap for about eight bucks, but when I'm building a rifle, I know exactly what the profile of that fore-stock needs to look like. What are the odds that a nose cap from a catalog will match the shape of the fore stock? But if I make my own nose cap,

Tim patterned this rifle after an original turned out by Isaac Berlin, who worked out of Easton, Pennsylvania in the 1780s. The heavy, cast patchbox lid on this rifle is similar to lids used on Christian Springs rifles. The 44-inch, .45 caliber barrel is finished in an authentic eighteenth century charcoal blue. The (not pictured) cheek side of the butt stock, as well as the tang surround, is heavily carved in high relief in typical baroque motifs.

I can make it the right shape from the start. Small things like that have a big impact on getting a gun's architecture right."

Tim does most of his gun work with hand tools. He uses a band saw to rough cut stock blanks and he uses a router to start out barrel channels, but most of his work is done with chisels and scrapers. Tim believes that he can't do much to improve on the old ways.

Tim said, "Power tools don't really speed up the work, but they do let you make mistakes a lot faster."

Tim believes that when you study original rifles, and closely examine the way eighteenth century builders actually did their work, you'll see that doing it the same way that they did will usually give you the best result. That close examination is the key. When I asked Tim what has changed about his work over the years

improve on it. So Tim likes to approach his work the same way they did.

He always starts with a full plank. "You can go anywhere if you start with a plank...any style of gun, any length of pull, Tim said. "If you start with a profiled stock blank, you are already locked in to some dimensions." In fact



Tim patterned this pistol after a Bucks County original made by John Shuler circa 1800. The pistol is decorated in typical Bucks County fashion with incised moldings and carving. The rifle that forms the mate to this pistol is pictured second from the top on the following page.



Tim not only builds rifles but also uses them to hunt with. He is shown here with a 12-point moose that was taken in September of 2016 with a rifle patterned after an original by George Schroyer. A full length view of this rifle can also be seen on pages 96 & 97.



Above: This walnut stocked rifle is patterned after a John Newcomer original from the late 1770s. Newcomer sometimes mixed fowler and rifle characteristics, as is the case with this .50 caliber rifle. It has the butt plate and trigger guard of a typical fowling piece, coupled with a rifle, octagon barrel and a rifle-style patchbox. **Right:** The pistol shows off the left hand side of the Bucks county pistol pictured on page 97. The tang molding is done in inlaid silver wire.

Tim built this left-handed fowling piece based on a 1760s original made by an unknown American gunsmith. Its architecture shows strong English influence. The 20 Ga octagon to round barrel is 46 inches long.

he didn't hesitate over his answer.

"I started building guns in 1999," he said, "In the early years I saw the whole gun, and trying to re-create that is a tough job, there's just too much to take in. Now I spend more time looking at...and I mean really examining...the details." As Tim

explains, that gun is made up of a myriad of details. If you concentrate on getting each detail right, in the end, you'll have a finer gun.

Not many people can make a living building flintlock guns. I asked Tim how he made the transition from part time builder to actually doing it for

a living. He told me that it happened very naturally. For most of his life Tim was a homebuilder. When the housing market slumped seven years ago, his home building work slowed down. But, as one door closed another opened. As home orders declined, his gun orders were on the rise, and, like a



Tim patterned this rifle after one built by Hanover, Pennsylvania gunsmith George Schroyer circa 1780. This .58 caliber rifle is the gun that Tim used this past September to drop a 12-point moose in Newfoundland, Canada.



This rifle is the mate to the Bucks county pistol pictured on page 95. It is patterned on a rifle made by Bucks County, Pennsylvania gunsmith John Shuler around 1800. The .50 caliber rifle has typical Bucks County Stylistic touches like the side-opening patchbox and the extended, fancy entry thimble finial, and, like the pistol, it is decorated with incised carving, and inlaid silver wire.



natural process, the gun work increased until it was his main business.

Tim believes that God gives us all gifts, and that his gun making abilities are his gift from the Lord. Tim is humble about his gifts, and he is very thankful for the good things in his life. "God

gave me this talent, and then He opened doors for me so I could use it to support my family. I definitely see His hand in my life."

Tim is a member of the Contemporary Longrifle Association (CLA), the Kentucky Rifle Association (KRA), the National Muzzle Loading

Rifle Association (NMLRA), and the National Rifle Association (NRA). More of Tim's work can be seen on his website at [www.williamsflintlocks.com], or he can be contacted at via email at [williamsflintlocks@gmail.com], or give him a call at 304-754-3273 (8a - 8p). **M**