

A Tradition of Arms

Americans' "love affair with guns" is a product of repeated necessity. Only a generation ago, guns were an everyday object for a young man.

by Roger D. McGrath

It's often been said, and not meant to be taken positively, that Americans have a love affair with guns. I would say that the love affair is with freedom and that guns are among several tools that have been used to ensure that we remain free. From the day the first colonists set foot on the Atlantic seaboard of North America, arms were regarded as essential. Early references abound. A 1623 law in Plymouth declared, "In regard of our dispersion so far asunder and the inconvenience that may befall, it is further ordered that every freeman or other inhabitant of this colony provide for himselfe and each under him able to beare arms a sufficient musket and other serviceable peece for war." In 1632, the Virginia Assembly advised every man to carry a gun to church in order to train with it after the service. A Rhode Island law of 1639 required that "noe man shall go two miles from the Towne unarmed, eyther with Gunn or Sword: and that none shall come to any public Meeting without his weapon." Connecticut required that all household heads "always be provided with and have in continual readiness, a well-fixed firelock ... or other good fire-arms ... a good sword, or cutlass ... one pound of good powder, four pounds of bullets fit for his gun, and twelve flints."

At first, all firearms came from Europe. Within a few generations, though, the manufacture of firearms began in the colonies. The finest gunsmiths were the Pennsylvania Dutch, who carried the gun-making skills they had learned in Germany to the New World. At Lancaster and Reading, especially, but other Pennsylvania towns also, these gunsmiths not only copied the rifles

they were familiar with back home but by the 1720s had developed a rifle peculiarly adapted to the ever-expanding American frontier. They lengthened the stubby barrel common to European rifles to four feet to allow the black powder more time to burn and to produce greater accuracy at the long distances common to the frontier. Also, in an effort to improve long-distance accuracy, they increased the size of the sights. To increase range and conserve lead, they enlarged and strengthened the trigger guard to withstand rough handling. They replaced the iron ramrod, which was heavy and difficult to produce on the frontier, with one made of hickory. The use of hickory involved an additional step. Wooden ramrods, even those made of rock-hard hickory, often broke when trying to drive a lead ball down the barrel of a rifle. The solution to the problem came with the grease patch — a small circle of tallow-soaked cloth that was placed under the lead ball before being rammed down the barrel.

The result of all these innovations was the famed Kentucky rifle. Known at first as the Long rifle because of its barrel length, the firearm got the name that made it famous from its vital service on the Kentucky frontier, that "dark and bloody ground." Wherever the frontiersman went, he was not without his Kentucky. A good rifle and steady aim meant food on the table and protection from the Indians. The Kentucky would be used on one frontier after another, from the colonial frontier of the 1720s to the trans-Mississippi frontier of the 1830s. It was the firearm that created what has been called in more recent times the "gun culture" of America.

With the butt of a Kentucky rifle pressed

The Kentucky rifle was the preferred long arm for Americans from the 1720s through the 1820s. An experienced rifleman could "drive the nail" or "snuff the candle" at 70 paces or knock a squirrel out of a tree at 200 yards.

firmly into his shoulder and a steady aim, an accomplished marksman could bring down a deer or man at 100 or more yards and knock a squirrel out of a tree at 200 or more. Pioneers regularly staged shooting contests up and down the colonial frontier, from New England to Georgia. At 70 paces, frontiersmen would "snuff the candle" or "drive the nail." In the former, the lead ball from the rifle would have to pass through the flame of a burning candle, blowing out the flame but striking neither wick nor candle. In the latter contest of marksmanship, the lead ball would have to strike the head of a nail and drive it farther into a post. Some even dared to shoot cups of whiskey off each other's head at 70 paces. Frontiersmen practiced with their rifles from boyhood on. The rifle was a tool more common than the plough. The American language filled with rifle-inspired colloquialisms — "a flash in the pan," "lock, stock, and barrel," "a straight shooter."

When the need arose, the combination of extraordinary shooting skill and the Kentucky rifle made American frontiersmen invaluable soldiers. Upon joining British General Edward Braddock's expedition against the French at Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War, George Washington had 400 frontiersmen with him, all armed with their own Kentucky rifles. The French and their Indian allies surprised Braddock's force and inflicted heavy casualties on the musket-armed British. Washington's frontiersmen, however, took cover