

John Shell, Legendary Kentucky Gunsmith: the Man and the Myth

Part III

The Commercialization of the Aged Gunmaker

by Shelby Gallien

Creating the Age Myth: While at Hazard, Doctor Nascher learned from town citizens that a local man and former district attorney, Mr. Rufus Roberts, was the primary promoter who took John Shell to fairs in both Kentucky and Tennessee and displayed him as “the oldest living man on earth.” Shell had been exploited in old age when his memory was failing and he could no longer keep facts straight in his mind. He was described in those years as being “illiterate, senile dement (sic), decrepit and easily imposed on.” Rufus Roberts knew there were no public records of Shell’s birth, baptism, or first marriage. He also knew it would be difficult for anyone to find a contact that could shed light on Shell’s true age, and that access to census records was difficult and most likely would not be undertaken. He also knew there was not enough at stake to induce anyone to make the arduous trip to Greasy Creek to investigate Shell’s true age. With that knowledge in mind, he devised a plan to make money off the old, wrinkled, and stooped John Shell.

Rufus Roberts got court clerk John Asher, with whom he was acquainted, to meet with a Shell relative named Sherman Ludington and get him to talk to Shell. Ludington’s job was to convince Shell that he should agree to being exhibited as the world’s oldest living man. In return, Shell would be paid \$200. Ludington would be compensated for accompanying Shell to the fairs and taking care of him. With the persuasion of a relative and the promise of money, Shell agreed to take part in the scheme. Falkner and his partners then went through Shell’s personal papers and found an 1849 tax receipt with a partially illegible date that looked like “1809” at first glance. They used the receipt to calculate and support Shell’s newly proclaimed birth date of 1788; the birth date was chosen so that the tax receipt would appear to be the first one that Shell received when reaching maturity at twenty-one years of age. It would have been risky making Shell appear older because someone then might ask to see an even earlier tax receipt, or record of Shell’s age.

Roberts was a natural promoter. He knew people in the Kentucky Agricultural Society who could set up the exhibition of Shell at state and county fairs in Kentucky. Roberts and his accomplice worked diligently with Shell until they had “drilled into his head” that he was 131 years old and born in 1788. Shell was easily confused and overly trusting of others in his elder years, and he came to believe (or at least appeared to believe) that he was 131 years old. Despite his mental impairment, Shell was generally able to answer questions about his great age in a rational manner to substantiate his claim. This ability was due in part to training by Rufus Roberts, who anticipated many of the questions Shell might be asked. When Shell got confused or could not answer a question, he would simply say, “I don’t remember” or “maybe.” At one exhibition he was asked if he had seen George Washington. Shell answered, “No, but I read of his death.” This answer implied Shell was alive at the time of Washington’s death, and that he could read, but Shell was illiterate.

Exhibition Circuit: Shell was taken to a number of state and county fairs where he was exhibited as the world’s oldest living man. **Figure 15** shows Shell at the Bluegrass Fair in Lexington, Ken-



Figure 15: Shell was exhibited at the Bluegrass Fair in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1919, where this photograph was taken. Shell is standing next to World War I hero Sgt. Willie Sandlin, who was also from Leslie County and was a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient. This photo was probably taken at about the same time as the one in figure 4. Courtesy Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, KY, the C. Frank Dunn Photograph Collection.



Figure 16: This newspaper print shows John Shell at a state fair in 1919 or 1920. The large white tag on his left (viewer’s right) lapel indicates he was taking part in the fair. One report stated that Shell wore a new pair of blue jeans to the fair, and perhaps he did for the trip, but all pictures of him at fairs show him wearing a dark coat and trousers. Courtesy Leslie County Public Library, Hyden, KY.

tucky, in 1919, apparently without his later white beard, and standing next to World War I Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. Willie Sandlin, also of Leslie County, Kentucky. After paying an entrance fee, curious fair goers could go inside a tent and see Shell, ask him questions, and listen to his stories. Another picture of Shell at a state fair in 1919 or 1920—as denoted by the large white tag handing from his left (reader’s right) lapel—is shown in **figure 16**. Each exhibition followed the same pattern. The promoters would begin by giving a lengthy speech about Shell, always with the explanation that Shell was exhibiting himself to raise money to pay off a \$400 mortgage on his farm in Leslie County; otherwise it would be foreclosed

by the bankers. Collections were then taken up among the audience to assist Shell in his financial problems. No one ever knew how much money Rufus Roberts and his partners made off of Shell, but Shell later told Doctor Nascher during an interview that he thought they made over \$5,000 from exhibiting him. The mercy collections were in addition to the fee charged to see and speak with Shell. A newspaper photograph of Shell at the Kentucky State Fair (see prior figure 4) shows a background sign promoting Shell as “The Oldest Man in the World” for an admission fee of fifteen cents. Doctor Nascher, while investigating Shell’s background in Hazard, also spoke with a sitting judge, Judge Everson, who told Nascher that Shell’s mortgage on his property had been foreclosed on many years before, but the old man was permitted to live on the farm, and there was little likelihood that he would be dispossessed: “The ramshackle hovel is hardly habitable, most of the few acres around it are barren, and with far more fertile land nearer the built up and more accessible places it was very doubtful if any home seeker would have taken the farm, even as a gift.” That testimony verified that Shell’s promoters were dishonest when seeking donations to help the destitute Shell avoid foreclosure; rather, they were trying to increase their profits from exhibiting Shell. The actual foreclosure on Shell’s property was the result of Shell selling timber that he did not own (not on his property). Shell suffered a judgment against him for the loss of the timber to the rightful owners. Shell could not pay the judgment and lost his property in foreclosure. His neighbors, Creech and Caldwell, bought the property at the fore-

closure and permitted Shell to stay and live in the cabin until his death in 1922.

Shell’s promoters took him from fair to fair at a relatively fast pace. The excitement of travel, crowds, being the center of attention, and answering questions about himself – which at times required mental effort to avoid admission of falsehood – took a heavy toll on Shell. He broke down mentally and physically from the ordeal. When he could no longer function effectively at the exhibitions, he was taken home to Greasy Creek and paid the promised \$200. This was corroborated by Shell and his second wife when interviewed by Doctor Nascher.

Getting to Shell’s Farm: Doctor Nascher started the last leg of his trip to see and interview Shell by riding on a milk wagon out of Hazard, Kentucky. He was accompanied by a hired guide. When the milk wagon turned back, Nascher had to finish the trip on a mule. He stopped the first evening at Henry Chappell’s place, one of Shell’s closest neighbors who lived about four miles from Shell’s farm. Nascher questioned Chappell that evening about Shell. Chappell stated that Shell had moved down Laurel Creek to Greasy Creek soon after the Civil War and was then about forty-five years old. Chappell was only a boy of twelve at the time, so he took little interest in Shell but knew some of the Shell children. Chappell stated he had never thought much of Shell’s age until he heard about Shell being exhibited at local fairs as the world’s oldest man and heard about the “bogus” 1809 tax receipt. Prior to the commotion at the fairs, Chappell said he had never heard of any claim of great age regarding Shell, and he (Chappell) estimated Shell’s

age to be about 100 years (in 1922). Nascher asked Chappell about Shell’s habits, and particularly the story that Shell never bathed. Chappell responded, “The old man’s hide hasn’t been wet in forty years unless some rain got on it.” The next morning Doctor Nascher resumed his trip to meet Shell. A more recent view (1975) of the Shell farm and its remote setting is shown in **figure 17**.

Interview and Physical Examination: According to Doctor Nascher, Shell’s cabin appeared as old as Shell did, and as sadly neglected. Everything was worn, dilapidated, and dirty. Inside the house were two broken beds; Shell lay on one bed, and perhaps a dozen pumpkins were on the other bed; the pumpkins suggest the season was late fall. A table, two rickety chairs, and a broken bureau were all the furnishings in the room. A single window in one wall was closed by a board; most of the light and fresh air came from the open doorway. Nascher thought there was a second room beyond the first, but it was dark and he presumed it was a storage room. This was the home of Kentucky gunsmith John Shell, his much younger second wife, and a four-and-a-half-year-old son. Shell was huddled up in bed wearing a shirt and trousers that were worn from much use. He was covered with a ragged quilt and a coat. Nascher’s guide introduced Nascher to Shell. Shell was so feeble they had to help him get out of bed and into a chair by the fireplace; he sat by the fire for half an hour warming his hands and feet before making a sound. Shell was barely coherent. He began telling his visitors of the “haints” (imaginary spirits) that were inside and outside of his house. They could




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Figure 17: The Shell farm and mill on Greasy Creek was located in a remote area of Leslie County which was in the thinly populated southeastern hill county region of Kentucky. This view of the house, very small in the distance, was taken in 1975 from a rock shelter across the valley and shows how isolated the homestead was. State Road 2009, seen in the foreground, now runs past the old Shell homestead in southern Leslie County below Chappell. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, KY.

fly in and out of the house and yelled at him, “Holy Roller” and “Pot Rack” repeatedly. Shell had tried to shoot one with his rifle, but the “haint” disappeared. Shell told them that three weeks earlier, three “Holy Rollers” came to his house, but he recognized them as devils and scared them off with his gun. Shell’s wife then explained to Doctor Nascher and his guide that a year earlier when Shell was sick with influenza, three men had come to the door. Shell crept out of bed with his gun and ordered them to leave. During Shell’s recital of these visions, no one could divert his attention from the stories. His voice was high and squeaky and he used many unknown words and sounds in describing the events that seemed so real to his feeble mind.

When Doctor Nascher asked Shell about his trips and exhibitions with Roberts and Asher, Shell violently denounced them along with his relative Sherman Ludington who took part in the promotion. When Shell was asked about his age, he stated he was 131 years old. Nascher then asked him if he might be older and Shell said, “Maybe I am 200 years.” Shell was asked how he knew he was 131 years old, and he answered, “Rufus Roberts said I was.” Shell also said he “saw the tax receipt in the box.” His wife then brought over a box with Shell’s papers and some Confederate

bills, all of which were important to Shell. Most of the papers were receipts, and the earliest tax receipt was dated 1848. The “infamous” 1849/1809” receipt was among the papers, and its date was quite illegible, but the document bore all of the same names as the 1848 and 1850 receipts. Nascher asked Shell why he agreed to go with Roberts and Asher to fairs. Shell said they had promised him \$200 if he would go to the fairs, and, “They said they would take care of me and give me bushels of money that they could get for me.” Shell went on to say that his relative who persuaded him to go to the fairs took care of him, and when he became sick from the excitement, the relative brought him back home. The promoters then gave his wife \$199 from the exhibition receipts, but they did not give Shell any of the money they collected for paying off the mortgage on his farm.

When Doctor Nascher asked Shell about the contradictory statements from neighbor Henry Chappell and others regarding his great age, Shell became confused and said he “didn’t remember.” He went on to tell Nascher that he married when he was twenty-two years old, his wife was a year younger than he was, and they moved to their present home on Greasy Creek a few years after the Civil War. When Nascher asked him about his claim of great age for his chil-


dren, Shell again became confused and said he “didn’t remember.” He quickly became tangled in thought when he tried to straighten out inconsistencies in ages and events in his life, and he soon reached the point where he could no longer talk, so Nascher stopped questioning him. Nascher’s opinion was that Shell’s memory was totally unreliable on dates and events in his life, and that he was very susceptible to suggestion, and one could manipulate about any reply from him. Shell had no sense of time between events, and long-ago events seemed to him to have taken place a few years ago. He couldn’t remember the sequence of his children, but could differentiate between some events that took place long ago and others that were recent. The conversation then turned to other less confusing topics. Shell was asked about his health, and he said he was sick only one time when he was sixty

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years old. At that time he broke three ribs; he gave his visitors a discourse on his medical abilities in healing the injury. He added that when he didn't feel good, he got "yarbs" (herbs) in the mountains and made teas and poultices. Shell told Nascher that he had no fixed habits except a "morning dram," or one swallow, of mountain dew, or corn juice, that he brewed himself.

After Doctor Nascher completed his examination and interview with Shell and his wife, he left their home and visited other Shell family members living in the area. One of his interviews was with Shell's son William C. Shell and grandson Stewart Shell; they are shown in **figure 18**. He interviewed these relatives regarding John Shell's life, his true age, and the true age of his children. After returning to New York, Nascher used his notes to assemble and publish an account of John Shell's life. Because much of his account is based on knowledge of John Shell from people who knew him, it offers the most accurate description of Shell known today. Key points of Nascher's article follow in shortened form.

Note: When reading Nascher's comments about Shell, the reader must keep in mind that Nascher came from a different background and social status than Shell and was not comfortable, or fully



Figure 18: William C. Shell was a son of gunsmith John Shell and lived about four miles from his father's house in Leslie County. He was interviewed by Dr. Nascher in 1920 regarding his father's (John Shell) true age. William C. Shell is on the right with his wife in the middle. Standing on the left is their son, Allen Shell, holding grandson John Shell, the great-grandson and namesake of old John Shell. Courtesy Leslie County Public Library, Hyden, KY.

accepting, of the austere backwoods environment in which Shell and his contemporaries lived. The result was that Nascher at times described Shell in a more negative or condescending manner than was proper. The reader must also keep in mind that Shell was very old and suffering from dementia when interviewed, and

he was not the gunsmith, mill operator, and farmer of earlier days.

Doctor Nascher's Account of Shell's Life: Shell was born near Knoxville, Tennessee, in May of 1822. His family moved to southern Kentucky when John was eighteen years old. In Kentucky, John hunted and trapped for four to five years to help support the family and then married a local woman, Elizabeth Nance, in 1844. He and his wife settled on a fertile piece of land along Laurel Creek about three miles from his family home and there built a cabin. Shell divided his time between hunting, trapping, and farming. The Shells lived in a primitive manner, were miles from the nearest neighbor, and had no knowledge of current events except for bits of information John picked up from strangers he met while on hunting trips. His nearest neighbor was the father of Henry Chappell about seven (sic) miles away, and their home was about midway between Hazard and Harlan and a fair day's horseback ride from each. The Shells had a child about every two years until there were ten (modern research has 11 children) in all. In 1866 or 1867 Shell moved to his present/last home, where his first wife died. Shell eventually married a second wife and fathered an eleventh (sic; his 12th child) child.

Shell lived simply. He arose at day-break and went to bed at dark. He ate when he was hungry, but only enough to satisfy his hunger—except when he killed a possum, at which time he gorged himself with the "delicacy." Until the loss of his teeth, he ate a large quantity of meat, mostly pork or small game, and he and his wife raised vegetables including corn, potatoes, cabbage, onions, pumpkins, squash, sweat potatoes, and beans to augment their diet. They drank milk or water, rarely had coffee or tea, and of course Shell had his "daily dram of corn juice." Throughout his life, he hunted and trapped in addition to farming his land. Despite statements from others that Shell ran a simple backwoods store out of his home in mid-life, his memory was too poor to recall any details, and his second wife knew nothing about it. These same factors help explain why Nascher made no mention of Shell's other early occupations, including gunsmithing.

The general opinion about Shell held by those who knew him later in life was that he was a "poor, dull, ignorant farmer unknown beyond his immediate neighbors." That was apparently true until he



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was exploited by two promoters and exhibited as the world's oldest living man. Most who knew Shell spoke disparagingly about him, but they generally praised his first wife who apparently was the real head of the household. One son, Abija, remained at home and did much of the heavier work around the house as Shell continued with his routine of hunting, tilling the soil, and making a little whiskey on the side. No one mentioned to Doctor Nascher during his various interviews that Shell had worked as a gunsmith or even a mill operator; those part-time occupations occurred earlier in Shell's life, too long ago for an old, mentally feeble man to remember. **Figure 19** shows a worn-out and haggard looking Shell during his final days.

According to Doctor Nascher, in old age Shell suffered from a "garrulous form of senile dementia with delusions and hallucinations." Shell's hallucinations in sight and hearing began soon after he sat near a fire for warmth. Shell also suffered "delusions of grandeur" in his last years. Although he was barely able to stand or walk without his cane, he insisted he could ride to Hayden and back, a round trip of forty miles, in a day, when even a good rider with a solid mount could cover only twenty miles a day over the difficult terrain. Shell insisted to his last day that he remained very strong and could still carry a large bag of potatoes (over fifty pounds) to his son's house four miles away. While reportedly a fine rifle shot in his prime, Shell could barely raise a rifle to his shoulder in old age, yet claimed he could still kill a squirrel at 200 yards. He also claimed he was as virile as he was a hundred years before, and he was wealthy with "thousands of dollar" in his document box—undoubtedly referring to his several worthless Confederate bills. When Shell was physically examined by Doctor Nascher, he was found to be five feet and six inches in height, stooped with age, and weighed only one hundred and three pounds. Newspapers had previously reported him as weighing one hundred and thirty pounds. He had but two lower teeth remaining, giving the appearance of fangs, and two additional broken stumps of teeth, all in the lower jaw. His upper teeth were completely gone, despite press reports of Shell being on his third or fourth complete set of teeth. Shell had white hair and a white beard. His eyes were gray, and his close vision was poor, yet his distance vision remained good. He had large hands and long, thin fingers. Nascher noted that during his medical



Figure 19: In his last days, John Shell was stooped and required a cane to walk. This picture, probably taken about 1921, shows a tired old man who could barely look at the camera. He is sitting in front of his coal shed and despite his age, he seems to show his grit by holding a pistol in his right hand. Courtesy Leslie County Public Library, Hyden, KY.

examination of Shell, Shell "babbed the entire time about the 'haints,' his troubles with his 'exploiters,' and his broken ribs sixty years before."

Most locals doubted Shell's paternity of his last child, James Albert Shell, born in 1915, in part because the boy did not look like Shell. Some reports, however,

stated the boy did resemble Shell's mother or his second wife. Despite the paternity rumors, in fact Shell had been indicted for adultery with a younger woman [Elizabeth Chapel] who worked as a housekeeper for him after his first wife died. After both acknowledged the relationship, Shell married her the next year, 1916, to avoid a trial, so perhaps Shell did father the child, James Albert. It was also possible that Shell "acknowledged" the relationship due to the efforts of others (the woman or her family) to persuade him of facts that might not have been true, but appealed to his masculinity or ego. However, the second wife was described by Doctor Nascher as "dull witted, doesn't know enough to invent lies." Nascher concluded that "Shell was still physically virile and potent at the time the child was born."

Doctor Nascher interviewed Shell's son William C. and William's son Allen (Shell's grandson) who lived four miles up Greasy Creek. They are shown in prior figure 16. William Shell's family was upset by the false statements being made about John Shell's age. They provided the actual ages of all of Shell's children, the fact that he was married at age twenty-two or twenty-three, and said they were not aware of the trips Shell had made to fairs, or his exploitation. **Note:** The word "exploitation" appears re-



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peatedly in Doctor Nascher's article; it is probably a word he chose to explain what he felt happened to Shell, rather than a word Shell or his relatives would use. Census records were used by Nascher as a final statement of fact to establish John Shell's true age. Shell was thirty-seven years old in 1860 and aged about ten years with each subsequent census. The 1900 census gave his birth date as May of 1822. Those records, taken in Shell's earlier years when his first wife was alive and their minds were lucid, provide convincing evidence of Shell's true age. The "oldest living man in the world" was a myth. But John Shell the man – a gunsmith, blacksmith, millwright, and master of many trades – was real. The myth brought him to the attention of the world, and the myth caused his life to be studied to prove or disprove his great age. Without the myth, the story of a backwoods Kentuckian who proved to be uncommon in many ways would have been lost to future generations. **Note:** Dr. Nascher reported that Shell was very angry with his "exploiters" and became "sick" from the heavy travel and exhibition schedule. Nascher's comments seemed to imply that Shell "saw the light" and began to accept Nascher's conclusion that he was not as old as he claimed to be. However, during Shell's last two years, he continued to make the same claims of great age, as documented in The New York Times. Perhaps the hectic fair circuit tired him, but apparently he never tired of telling stories about his great age – and never tired of the notoriety that it brought him.

Summary: The life of Kentucky gunsmith John Shell became public knowledge in 1918 when his claims of extraordinary age, reportedly being 131 years old that year, were first published in Kentucky newspapers. For the next several years until his death in 1922, he became Kentucky's best known backwoods celebrity, and his fame spread from coast to coast. Shell seemingly enjoyed his brief time as a celebrity, traveling outside of Leslie County, and all the attention he received. Stories grew about Shell, and he became almost superhuman for his retained capabilities at such an old age. Yet many doubted Shell's age claims. The years following World War I brought rapid change and uncertainty to America, and citizens longed for stability and assur-



Figure 20: This is how John Shell's house looks today. It has reclaimed some of its dignity after being put on the National Register of Historical Places in 1975, and has been protected with the addition of a metal roof over the old shingled roof. The house is nestled against a hill at the end of a valley, and Greasy Creek lies off to the right. Note the original small cabin or smoke house to the left of the bigger house has lost its roof since it was photographed in 1975. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, KY; photo by P. Kennedy.

ances of future security. John Shell provided an image that appealed to those in want. He served as a living reminder of the earlier, hardworking generations that built America and made her strong. His story made others feel good about America and its future. Even the first significant book published on the American longrifle, *The Kentucky Rifle* by Capt. John Dillon, accepted Shell's claims and honored his longevity along with his gunmaking in Kentucky. But Shell's doubters never went away.

Dr. Nascher brought to light an interesting backwoods blacksmith, gunsmith, mill operator, and mechanic hidden deep within Kentucky's southeastern hill county who, lacking any formal education, learned how to survive and raise a large family. Even if Shell was not the man he claimed to be, perhaps more importantly he provided an accurate picture of what life was like for many poorly educated hunters and subsistence farmers who settled America's frontiers and continued in the same lifestyle in remote areas until well into the twentieth century. The Shell homestead as it appears today, after limited preservation, is shown in **figure 20**. It should remind all Americans of the sacrifices and hard work our forefathers faced on a daily basis, and how well that same work ethic could serve America in today's hectic world – if only we would embrace it.

Ongoing Research: The author continues to research early Kentucky gunmakers and their guns. He would enjoy hearing from anyone with information on the state's early gunmakers or examples of their work that can be shared. (Call evenings: 260-637-8068.)

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Answers for puzzle on page 47

