

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

## Part I

by Shelby Gallien

**Foreword:** Kentucky had many competent gunsmiths working within her borders during the muzzleloading era, but none achieved more celebrity than John Shell of Leslie County. He was a southeastern hill-country gunsmith, blacksmith, mechanic, millwright, and farmer. He did other jobs as well while he worked to make a living in one of the poorest rural areas of Kentucky. Shell could be described as a jack of all trades, but he was also part showman and storyteller. Somewhere along the way, and partly from his own doing, the truth and the fiction about him became blurred. By the time of his death in 1922, Shell had become a national celebrity of sorts, known for his storytelling and his claim of being “*the oldest living man in the world.*” Yet behind the late-in-life showmanship, entertaining stories, and claims of great age, there is a story of a mountaineer mechanic and part-time gunsmith whose self-reliance and wide range of skills allowed him to survive in the backwoods of Kentucky.

Several stories regarding John Shell’s life seem to co-exist today, causing uncertainty about who the man really was. The first and perhaps best documented story covers Shell’s notoriety in later years when he claimed to be over 130 years old. Numerous anecdotes about Shell appeared during this short period of his life between 1918 and 1922; most strayed from the truth, forever coloring the image of the man. The second story of Shell is pieced together from the few surviving records of his working years in Kentucky. This story describes the *real* Shell, his gunsmithing activities, and the other trades he followed to subsist in Kentucky’s rural southeastern hill country. Several surviving rifles by Shell add substance to this part of his life’s story. The third story of Shell’s life is taken from a physical examination of Shell in his last year, 1922, by New York medical doctor I. L. Nascher. Doctor Nascher answered the lingering question about Shell’s claimed great age in an irrefutable manner, and in the process he added much knowledge of Shell’s life to the public record.

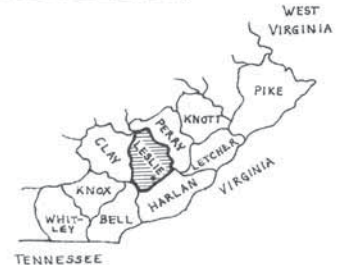
America’s growing disconnect with its pioneer past has erased the human element in much of its history. Important names and events are remembered, but the *common* people who lived and died settling this nation are often forgotten. John Shell’s name may be remembered, but who remembers the man behind the name? He is one of many who, without thought about their own role, struggled to build this nation acre by acre, farm by farm, county by county, and state by state. Perhaps Shell’s story can help preserve a bit of America’s fading connection to its past. Shell had a favorite expression he often used: “damned ‘em.” A neighbor recalled visiting Shell in his later years. Shell was outside cleaning debris out of his mill race and suddenly fell. The neighbor asked Shell if he were hurt; Shell answered, “Nope, I just slipped and fell on them old slick rocks, damned ‘em.” That was vintage John Shell.

**Backwoods Celebrity:** The Cumberland Plateau Region in southeastern Kentucky was isolated from the rest of the state.

This was due to its rough terrain, coupled with the clannish tendencies of the independent and self-reliant Scots-Irish who first settled the area. Its inhabitants had little communication with the outside world beyond the mountains. Coal and lumber were the area’s primary industries, and “scratch” or dirt farming was essential to augment meager incomes. This region, shown in **figure 1**, was the home of Kentucky gunsmith John Shell. For many years he worked in Harlan County and then Leslie County (broken off from Harlan, Clay, and Perry counties in 1878) as a farmer, gunsmith, blacksmith, and mill operator in general obscurity. Then in 1918 he was *discovered* by the world beyond Leslie County and quickly became a celebrity in Kentucky’s press for his claim of being the oldest living man in Kentucky.



*Figure 1: John Shell lived in the rugged southeastern hill country of Kentucky known as the Cumberland Plateau region. Its topography ranged from hilly to mountainous, its soils were thin, and its population was small. The region is shaded on the Kentucky map. The enlarged view of a section of the map shows Harlan and Leslie Counties and their close proximity to Virginia. Shell’s home was initially in Harlan County but the area became part of Leslie County when it was formed in 1878. The black dot directly under the word Leslie is the location of Shell’s homestead.*



*Figure 2: John Shell is standing on the front porch of his Leslie County home in this circa 1918 picture. He constantly used a cane or walking stick in his later years. The porch ran completely across the front of Shell’s house, but it was later removed, and no trace of it remains today. However, the original porch can be seen in the picture of Shell’s home shown in figure 3. Courtesy Leslie County Public Library, Hyden, KY*

John Shell was a storyteller who enjoyed reminiscing about his experiences and toughness as a youth. Late in life he began to claim that he was born in 1788. His claim caught the attention of the press in 1918 when Shell said he was 130 years old, and he quickly became a household name across the state. Despite later stories to the contrary, Shell seemed to enjoy the attention his new-found notoriety brought him. **Figure 2** shows Shell's old, worn appearance during his last years. He looked the part, and most people wanted to believe him. As his fame grew, so did his resolve. He soon advertised himself as the oldest living man not just in Kentucky, but in the world. During the last four years of his life, Shell became a national celebrity of sorts. He was invited to state and county fairs and other venues where he went on display as the world's oldest living man. In 1919 he was personally invited by the Governor of Kentucky to exhibit himself at the Kentucky State Fair in Louisville. During those years, Shell traveled extensively within Kentucky and at times in Tennessee due to his notoriety. The public's interest in Shell was fueled by his innate ability to entertain folks with captivating stories and yarns. It was an exciting period for an otherwise old backwoods mechanic and gunsmith who had never ventured far from home.

Shell was proud of his late fame, and when skeptics questioned his age at the Kentucky State Fair in 1919, he became "biling [boiling] mad" and indignantly went home to retrieve a tax receipt that reportedly showed he paid taxes in 1809, verifying his great age to the non-believers. During Shell's last year in 1922, he steadfastly claimed he was 134 years old. In his last years, Shell was examined by a number of doctors, most of who doubted but could not disprove his age claim. Most thought he had added at least twenty years to his real age.

**Shell's Stories:** Shell enjoyed telling stories and *yarns* to younger family members in his later years. As his fame grew in Kentucky, people began coming to see him, and he shared his recollections with them. His yarns were probably not much different from stories told around campfires in frontier Kentucky to pass an enjoyable hour or so before bedtime. Most stories grew better with each retelling, and Shell apparently excelled in this area. His stories and claims show the mind of an inventive and proud hill county citizen, despite being isolated from the bigger Kentucky cities for most of his life. By claiming great

age, Shell could spin more colorful yarns about fighting Indians and meeting early frontier figures such as Daniel Boone. In truth Shell was a very old man in his last years, living to be almost 100 years old. When he became famous, most people knowledgeable about his real age had already preceded him in death. Their passing left him unencumbered in stretching his age to fit his frontier stories. Several of his stories are repeated here to show the nature of the man, his imagination, and his ability to shape his own reputation in later years.

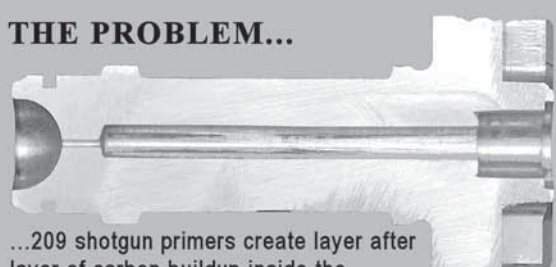
Shell claimed that he was a friend of Daniel Boone and saw Boone shoot deer, bears, and wild turkeys. A check of key dates in Boone's life shows that Boone permanently left Kentucky for the Femme Osage country of Missouri in 1799, years before Shell was born. Even if Shell were born in 1788 as he claimed, he was still a young boy of eleven growing up in Tennessee when Boone left Kentucky for Missouri, so the odds of ever meeting Boone or hunting with him are about nil. The Boone connection was at most a wishful story. In a similar story, Shell claimed that when young he helped defend the citizens of Harlan County, Kentucky, from Indian attacks involving flaming arrows. He was born too late to play a part in frontier battles with the Indians, but as a child he undoubtedly heard stirring tales such as the time Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton heroically defended Boonesborough in 1777. Shell probably wished he had been there, and later incorporated himself into similar stories.

Shell believed that water could cure many ills. When his children got sick, he would make them swim across the mill pond, said to be over twenty-five feet wide. His son John Jr., known as P.M., was once bitten by a rattlesnake. Shell took him to the creek to wash the bite, forcing the poison out in the process. Shell claimed "the green poison was so strong it flowed upstream against the current."

The Shell farm in Leslie County, shown in **figure 3**, was located on Greasy Creek. According to Shell, the creek was originally known as Laurel Creek, and he was responsible for the creek's name change. One day he was hunting in the mountains above Laurel Creek and shot a large bear. The wounded bear ran off and as it weakened, it tumbled down the mountain side and into a deep pocket of water called the "Blue Hole" on upper Laurel Creek. Shell could not retrieve the dead bear from the deep water, so he left it there. Eventually the carcass decomposed, and its

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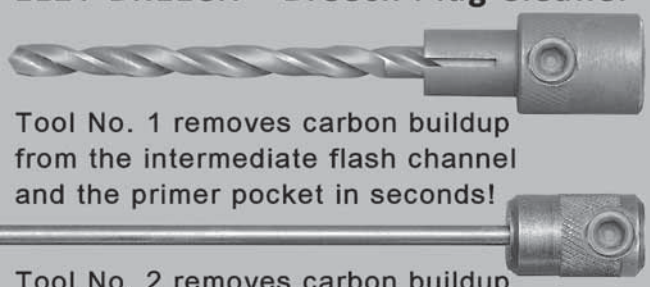


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Figure 3: This early photograph of the Shell homestead was probably taken about 1900. Shell lived here for over fifty years, until his death in 1922. The extended log cabin with its center chimney and two-level roof line can be seen behind the long, lean-to style front porch. Note the hilly terrain, extensive fencing around the house and yard, the several out-buildings, and smoke rising from the chimney. The large shade trees around the house are gone today, victims of the years. From *The Kentucky Rifle* (1924) by Capt. John Dillin

rotting body fat created a greasy scum on the surface of Laurel Creek for a long time afterward. According to Shell, that was why the creek was renamed Greasy Creek, by which it is known today.

The entire Midwest was shaken by a huge earthquake in December of 1811, centered at New Madrid, Missouri. Shell claimed he experienced the earthquake first hand and saw dishes shake off the table and pictures fall from the walls. Again, being born about 1822, he was probably retelling stories he had heard from his father and mother and enhanced them by telling them as if he had been there.

According to Shell descendants, John Shell was always ready to fight for his beliefs. When the Civil War began in

1861, Shell reportedly wanted to fight for the Confederacy, so he rode all the way to Virginia to fight for General Robert E. Lee. When Shell arrived in Virginia, he got to see Lee and tried to enlist personally with him. Lee supposedly told Shell, "Sir, I admire you for riding this far. But sir, I cannot take you because of your age." Shell was very disappointed because he was *only* 74 years old. He was so hurt by the rejection that he would later tear up when recounting the story. The story raises the question of why Shell didn't fight in the War of 1812 or the Mexican War if he felt so strongly politically and was as old as he claimed. The answer is that he wasn't even born in 1812. Another answer is that hill county people in eastern Kentucky were isolated, physically cut off from much information and events taking place in the rest of Kentucky, and many such people including Shell probably preferred to remain in their mountain homes and take care of their own daily problems, and let the outside world take care of itself. If someone were to tell a story explaining

why he didn't fight in the Civil War, one involving Robert E. Lee's personally excusing him from service would be about as good as one could invent.

Shell's later celebrity came from his consistent claims of being born in 1788. He claimed to be 126 years old when he fathered his last child, son James Albert Shell, in 1915, and 131 years old at the 1919 State Fair. He often took his young son to the state and county fairs, perhaps to make himself look older by the comparison when exhibited as the world's oldest man, and perhaps to prove his ongoing virility. In his last years Shell was noted as being five feet and five inches tall and weighing only 130 pounds. His slight appearance undoubt-

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Figure 4: During the last four years of Shell's life, he became a celebrity in Kentucky for his claim of great age. This 1919 photo of Shell was taken at the Lexington, Kentucky, Bluegrass Fair. The banner behind Shell states he is "the oldest man in the world, 131 years old." A fifteen cents admission was charged to see Shell. The three unidentified men in the picture are probably Judge Rufus Roberts, his promoter, the promoter's assistant John Asher, and Shell's relative Sherman Ludington who took care of him while traveling. The woman, perhaps another caretaker, is unknown. Courtesy Kentucky Historical Society, the C. Frank Dunn Photograph Collection

edly supported his age claim. After attending the Kentucky State Fair in 1919, Shell reportedly returned home to enter a shooting match against three much younger men. He is said to have beaten them all using a *flintlock gun* he had made for himself a hundred years before.

At the 1919 State Fair in Louisville, Shell was asked by a "great Kentucky temperance leader" how he had lived so long. Shell replied that "Many's the time I've laid out all night under a tree which had three or four coon in it. Didn't want the dogs to tear 'em up. I got drunk once. It was when I was about twelve years old. I was a right smart chunk of a boy in them days. They was having a log rollin' and everybody went down to the branch to get 'em some liquor, and I went too. They had a take me home. But I haven't drunk much since." A picture of Shell at the 1919 Bluegrass Fair in Lexington, Kentucky, is shown in **figure 4**. A sign behind Shell indicates it cost fifteen cents for someone to see and talk to the "Oldest Man in the World."

At the Lexington Fair in the summer of 1919 Shell was asked by a reporter if he knew the reason for his longevity. Shell responded, "It must have been hard times that kept me alive. I don't know anything else that it could have been. I've taken it

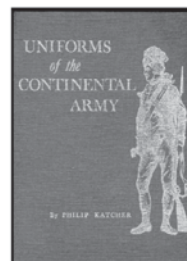
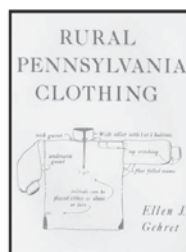
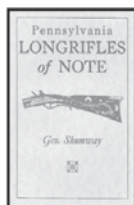
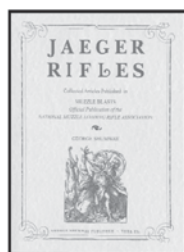
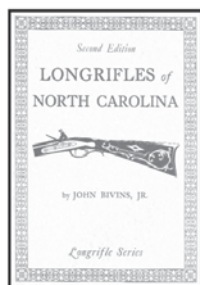
tough and rough. I am an old hunter; I hunted coon and deer. I took the weather as it came. Many nights I have lain out. Sometimes the snow covered me when I got up. There were no roads even in those days; we took things as they came. Hard times surely are what have made me live so long."

One of Shell's boasts to support his claim of great age was that he had grown three sets of teeth during his lifetime. His third set of teeth was supposedly small "baby" teeth. While most of his believers never questioned the teeth story, a medical examination in 1920 showed that Shell had lost virtually all of his teeth years before – and nothing new had grown in.

**Family History:** Research has shown that John Shell's family arrived in America in the early 1700s when Johann Casper Schell left Germany and settled with other German immigrants in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He later moved to Maryland, and then again to North Carolina. His son John accompanied him in the moves, and in 1782 grandson Samuel Shell was born in North Carolina. The grandson's name was probably John Samuel Shell, but he went by Samuel to avoid confusion with his father. Samuel Shell was trained as a gunsmith, and after reaching maturity he married Mary Ann Froy/Fry/Frye in North Carolina. They were in North Carolina in 1810, according to census data, and they later moved to Warren County, Tennessee, where they were listed in the 1820 census. At least seven and perhaps eight children were born to Samuel and Mary Shell while in Tennessee, including son John, the future Kentucky gunsmith. John was born in May of 1822 [per 1900 census] and spent his first years in Tennessee. He later recalled that he never wore shoes as a child, and when he got older, he chewed tobacco constantly. The family moved to Bell County, Kentucky, and took up land near today's Pineville. They cleared some acreage and raised a crop, but soon after moved again to Poor Fork in Harlan County, Kentucky, according to the 1830 census. The father, Samuel, set up and operated a water mill at Poor Fork; he also traveled around eastern Kentucky building water mills for others.

Another source states when the family moved to Kentucky, they settled near the mouth of Clover Fork of the Cumberland River near where the town of Harlan stands today. The father, Samuel John Shell, built and operated the first water-powered mill in the county. He was assisted at the mill by his son John, who was about twelve years old at the time, making the year about 1834. Eventually John learned how to operate a mill. In addition, he was taught blacksmithing and at least rudimentary gunsmithing by his father. Samuel Shell was later killed during the Civil War when he was mistaken for a soldier. Another source

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states that John Shell's grandfather was probably Samuel Shell, a gunsmith of Liverpool, Pennsylvania. That Samuel had a son named John Samuel Shell who was born about 1788, learned the gunsmith's trade from his father, and later moved to Tennessee. John Samuel Shell, often called Samuel, was the father of Kentucky's John Shell who became a gunsmith.

Little is known about John Shell's early life. He probably followed the normal practices of the day and began training as a gunsmith, blacksmith, and mechanic under his father's tutelage when about fourteen years old. His training started in Tennessee and ended in Kentucky. Tennessee influences are seen in Shell's surviving rifles and attest to his Tennessee training. Shell probably completed his training on his twenty-first birthday and began working as a journeyman in 1843 or early 1844. That date is corroborated by his first appearance on a Kentucky tax list in 1844 in Harlan County. Shell followed another tradition of young gunsmiths by getting married soon after completing his training. He married his first wife, Elizabeth "Betsey" Nance, on October 19, 1844 in Harlan County. The couple moved off the elder Shell's homestead and "over the mountain" to settle on Little Laurel Creek, where they lived for over twenty years in a small, one-room cabin. After the Civil War, the growing family moved down the creek about a mile to Greasy Creek near the mouth of (Little?) Laurel Creek in what was then Clay County. Another source described the move by stating John Shell and his wife settled in a narrow valley near the mouth of Shell Branch of Laurel Creek, which flowed into Greasy Creek. The couple remained at this location for the rest of their lives.

The Shell family had ten children by the time they moved to Greasy Creek, and they needed a larger house. One account states that their first home on Greasy Creek was a windowless, one-room log cabin that was already there when the Shells arrived. The roof was covered with moss, according to Shell in later years, indicating it had been there for some time before Shell's arrival. Shell never knew who built the original cabin, but it has survived as an out building on the Shell farm and is shown in **figure 5**. Shell then began building his permanent home soon after arriving at Greasy Creek.

A second account of Shell's Greasy Creek home is probably more accurate. The land was originally claimed, or patented, by a member of the Chappell family. A piece was then sold to H. M. Lewis, who in turn sold it to John Shell. According to this account, the larger Shell house was already standing (which agrees with later assessments of the age of the house's two sections, or "pens"), and Chappell had built at least part of the



*Figure 5: When Shell first arrived on his farm in Leslie County, a small abandoned cabin was already there. According to Shell, his family lived in this makeshift cabin with a single door and no windows until the larger hewn log cabin could be built. The edge of the larger permanent cabin can be seen behind and to the right of the small cabin. Later accounts said the smaller cabin was a smoke house, and the main cabin was already there when Shell arrived about 1867. This picture was taken in 1975. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, Kentucky*

house. This account states that the smaller cabin (where Shell supposedly lived the first year) was actually the smoke house. Shell's property included about 300 acres of land in addition to the house, but much of the acreage was hilly and of little value. When his farm was foreclosed by creditors years later, records verified there were about 300 acres of land with the house.



*Figure 6a: This view of the Shell homestead shows the front and left end of the hewn log home as it appeared in 1975, the year it was entered into the National Register of Historic Places. Prior to that time the home had not been lived in or maintained for many years. The cabin had two front doors and a third door in the middle with stairs to the second floor. The smaller cabin to the right reportedly housed Shell's family until the larger hewn log cabin was built, but it may have simply been their smoke house. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, Kentucky*



Figure 6b: The back of the Shell homestead as it appeared in 1975 clearly shows the earlier, taller cabin on the left, and the later, lower addition on the right. Both sections have an upper or second floor. Note the original clapboard siding high up under the eaves on the end of the house, indicating that the entire house was sided at one time, but over the years the siding was lost or removed. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, Kentucky

The Shell house has survived to the present day and was entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. Construction of the house is described in William Macintire's *The Pioneer Log House in Kentucky*, published by the Kentucky Heritage Council. That publication listed the house as a *saddlebag* type of log dwelling consisting of an earlier, circa 1825 single-pen, two story house with large external chimney, and a later circa 1840 lower (but longer) two story wing that enlarged the original chimney to accommodate a second fireplace in the addition. These dates support the account that the house was already there when Shell purchased the property soon after the Civil War. Shell's home, built of hewn logs, is shown in figures 6a and 6b. It was originally located in Harlan County, but the area later became part of Leslie County in 1878. The home was about twenty miles from Hyden, and Hyden was about twenty miles from Hazard, where the closest railroad station was located. In 1870 Shell's address was given as Mount Pleasant in Harlan County. Shell reportedly carved a stone wash basin and placed it near the smaller cabin structure, or smoke house. The basin, seen in figure 7, suggests that Shell could work stone, which was understandable if he made the burrs for his mill on Greasy Creek.

Shell's family had a reputation for being simple, hospitable people, and Shell's wife was known to run the household, perhaps because Shell was gone so much either hunting or selling his wares. Shell was a farmer, store keeper, grist mill operator, blacksmith, and gunsmith when the need arose. During his early years he hunted and trapped in addition to farming, and later he was known as a wood carver and herb collector. He traveled by mule each month to Jonesville, Virginia, to sell his honey, ginseng, and the wooden bowls and vessels he carved. John lost his first wife, Elizabeth Nance Shell, in about 1904 when he was 82 years old. Twelve years later, in 1916, he married a much younger woman, neighbor Elizabeth Chapel, who by one account was forty-five years old but by another was only thirty-five. She had cleaned house for Shell after his first wife died, and she was also a midwife who delivered babies in the neighborhood. He had his eleventh and final child with her, a son named Albert James Shell, who was born in 1915 when Shell was ninety-three years old. Elizabeth Chapel Shell died in March of 1920, leaving John with a five-year-old boy when he was 98 years old. The *International Herald Tribune* newspaper of New York ran an



Figure 7: This stone wash basin was carved by John Shell and placed near the smaller original cabin that sits in front and to the side, of the larger Shell home. While roughly carved, the basin is evidence of another skill that Shell was capable of, that of stone carving. Courtesy Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, Kentucky

interesting, if somewhat fanciful, account of Shell's reaction to Elizabeth Chapel Shell's death in the March 9, 1920, edition: "John Shell a mountaineer of Kentucky, had an exciting 133rd birthday yesterday [March 8] according to news dispatches. He returned home after visiting a place a few miles away and found that his wife, aged 35, had died in his absence, and that his 6-year-old son was in the hands of his father-in-law, aged 70. Mr. Shell objected to the abduction of the child and seized his flintlock rifle, which he had made 100 years ago, and forced his father-in-law to return the boy to his home."

In 1920 Miss Zilpha Roberts of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission was sent to Leslie County to work with illiterates. She tried to teach John Shell to read and write, but her efforts were unsuccessful, probably due to Shell's growing mental deficiencies by that late date. Miss Roberts reported that she regretted the old man was so neglected in his old age. He was living in squalor and eating leftovers and donated food from his neighbors. Yet she admitted that he had never been sick and had lived to a very old age, although she doubted the great age claims made in his last years. Toward the end, Shell reportedly lived alone at times, and at other times he lived with neighbors Sam Creech or Creech's nephew, John Caldwell. His mind had weakened, and he often saw ghosts and spirits. His neighbor Caldwell often *chased* the ghosts away by firing a rifle, easing Shell's wandering mind. When Shell lived alone, the neighbors pitched in by taking him food. They would often find him asleep in his bed with pigs roaming in and out of the house. The pigs had become Shell's pets in old age, and he claimed the Bible had taught him that a good man was always kind to animals. **MB**

~ To Be Continued ~



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