

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

Part II

by Shelby Gallien



Figure 8 - After Shell's death in 1922, the remains of his grist mill on Greasy Creek were photographed. Shell learned how to build and operate a mill from his father, and after settling on Greasy Creek about 1867, he built an entire mill by himself, including all working parts, a twenty-five feet wide mill dam, and a mill race to bring water to the mill. Shell was mentally weak in his last years, but during his working life he was a capable mechanic who could do many different jobs successfully. Courtesy Leslie County Public Library, Hyden, KY.

Shell's rifles and legacy

A Man of Many Skills: An interesting aspect of John Shell's working life was the large number of trades he worked at. All sources referencing Shell agree that he practiced multiple trades throughout his lifetime. Most early gunsmiths were also blacksmiths and mechanics and often did general repair work to augment their income. But Shell's skills went well beyond those of the average gunsmith. The article "John Shell's Rifles" in *Stock and Steel*,

Vol. 1, No. 1, March, 1923, published by the Associated Firearms Collectors of America, Marshalltown, IA, states that Shell was a gunsmith, miller, wainwright (made and repaired wagons), and blacksmith. In addition to making guns, he made knives, axes, hammers, spinning wheels, looms, and whiskey for the local community. He also made all the mechanical components of a grist mill in Leslie County, including its "barrels, tubs, and complete equipment," and operated the mill on Greasy Creek for many years after its completion. The mill was the first water mill in Leslie County. When running the mill, Shell would also work on guns and do tinker's work (mending household utensils) as time permitted. The remnants of his mill are shown in **figure 8**, and the old mill stones now decorate the yard of the Caldwell home across the creek from the Shell homestead. Another source, *Rugged Trail to Appalachia* by Mary Brewer, added the jobs of beekeeper, herb gatherer, and wood carver (bowls) to Shell's list of occupations. Most sources state that Shell farmed most of his life in addition to his other jobs, and when he first came to Harlan County, he trapped and hunted to augment his income.

Shell's Rifles: A mid-1840s date for Shell to start making guns is consistent with key dates in his life and the style of rifles he made. All surviving guns are mid-1840s or later percussion rifles. The author has seen three signed John Shell

rifles, and several unsigned guns are thought to be his work. All are plain, walnut stocked rifles with iron primary mountings and at times brass secondary mountings such as ramrod pipes. Shell's guns are typical of most working rifles made in the mountainous regions of southeastern Kentucky and northern Tennessee. Workmanship is pedestrian but acceptable and lacks the details and fine architecture of earlier American rifles. Shell made basic working guns without embellishments. His guns lacked patchboxes, carving, and inlay work and were undoubtedly made with the limited finances of his customers in mind. Shell was a "born mechanic" and made most of the iron parts used on his guns, including the hand-forged barrels and iron mountings. His percussion locks were often hand-made, but he used commercial locks later in life. One source states that Shell was an avid trapper and hunter, used only his own rifles, and would go on hunting trips that lasted several weeks. He was a fine shot, and his hunting skills with a rifle reportedly allowed him to tweak the rifles he made, resulting in guns of superior accuracy. However, it should be kept in mind that citizens in many Kentucky counties boasted that their local gunsmith was the best shot and built the most accurate guns in the state, so a little common sense is needed when evaluating such claims.

Two of the three John Shell rifles that the author has seen were full-stocked rifles, and the third was a small caliber, half-stocked rifle with a simple cap box in the



Figure 9a - A view of Shell's personal rifle illustrates many of the details found on other Shell rifles. His guns were stocked in walnut, large mountings were forged of iron, and smaller mountings were often brass. All parts including the swamped barrel, lock, and set triggers appear hand-made by Shell on this rifle. Note the simple iron guard and the two-piece iron butt plate that was nailed to the stock. Stocking was simple and unsophisticated, but the rifle was functional and accurate. Courtesy M. Clark.



Figure 9b - The reverse of Shell's rifle has a small, inverted "T" lock bolt washer that is reminiscent of Tennessee rifles. There are a Kentucky-style two-screw tang, shallow side facings, and an almost crude cheekpiece. No molding lines are present. Shell supposedly won many shooting matches with this rifle, and in later years as his mind weakened, he used the rifle to chase away "flying spirits" or "haints" from his house. Courtesy M. Clark.

butt. The half-stocked gun was of average workmanship and marked "J. SHELL" in block letters on the barrel, but otherwise had no features of significance. However, the two full-stocked rifles displayed several interesting details.

The first full-stocked rifle is shown in **figures 9a** and **9b**, and is Shell's best known gun. It was illustrated in Captain John Dillin's book, *The Kentucky Rifle*, published in 1924, and it was John Shell's personal gun. Dillin shows a picture of Shell holding this rifle in 1919; the picture is reproduced as **figure 10**.



*Figure 10 - John Shell and his personal rifle were photographed in 1919; the photo appeared in Capt. John Dillin's *The Kentucky Rifle* (1924). Details of the rifle can be seen in prior figures 9a, and b. The original picture had Shell holding a pistol in his left hand, but it was "painted out" of the photo because it detracted from the image of an old nineteenth-century gunmaker with his longrifle. The *Kentucky Rifle* (1924) by Capt. John Dillin.*

This rifle and Shell's hunting bag and powder horn that accompanied it have survived in good condition in a private collection. The bag and horn are illustrated in **figure 11**. The gun is a long-barreled percussion rifle with a walnut stock, typical of Shell's known work. The stocking and the round-tailed lock date the gun to the 1850s or later.



Figure 11 - This is the personal hunting bag and powder horn of Shell that accompanied his rifle. The rifle, bag, and powder horn have survived together in good condition and continue to be well cared for by a modern collector. The utilitarian horn has no obvious southern or regional characteristics. Note the small powder measure that implies the outfit was paired with a small-bore percussion rifle. Courtesy M. Clark.

Shell's second known full-stocked rifle was made in 1870 and is shown in **figure 12**. It is a plain, rudimentary rifle, yet it has an important barrel inscription. The gun was always percussion, has a long, hand-forged barrel, and is dated 1870. The walnut stock has no inlays, molding lines, or other decorative details. The forty-five inch barrel is lightly swamped and has a bore of about .32 caliber. The barrel is attached to the stock with later-style round pins and shows forging (hammer) marks on its exposed flats. Mountings are mixed, of both brass and iron. The one-piece nose cap and four ramrod pipes are made of sheet brass, while the larger trigger guard, butt plate, and toe plate are forged from iron. The presence of brass when iron mountings were the norm was probably an upgrade on this rifle. In backwoods fashion, the butt plate is attached with three nails, and the trigger guard is attached by wood

screws running up through the front and rear extensions. The rifle has a five-inch tang with two wood screws securing it to the stock. Contrary to standard gun building practices, there is no threaded tang bolt that screws into the trigger plate. The most significant part of the rifle is its lengthy barrel inscription, which reads: "No * 35 * 1870 * J S * \$16." While the rifle does not carry a full signature, the barrel inscription's initials "J S" are engraved in large block letters similar to Shell's other known signatures on surviving guns. The rifle's workmanship is like that of other known Shell rifles and demonstrates eastern Kentucky characteristics. Such characteristics include the long, swamped barrel with hammer marks, simple and straight-lined stock architecture, use of four ramrod pipes, long tang with two wood screws, and major mountings made of iron with secondary mountings of either iron or brass.

Several facts about eastern Kentucky gunmaking can be deduced from the barrel inscription. The 1870 date verifies that, at least in Kentucky's eastern hill country, full-stocked rifles with forty-five inch barrels were still being made after the Civil War. The hand-forged barrel, butt plate, and trigger guard give testimony to the ongoing hill country practice of hand-making most parts on guns long after big-city gunmakers began using commercial parts to expedite the gun building process. Perhaps hand-made parts were a local preference, but their presence is probably more a reflection of hill country economics. Cash was almost nonexistent, but labor and raw materials were available. Without cash to buy commercial parts, they had to be made locally. The better part of the price of the gun was probably paid in produce and barter due to the paucity of hard money. That, of course, leads to the price, proudly engraved on the barrel as \$16 for a plain full-stocked rifle. It seems a little high for such a basic gun,

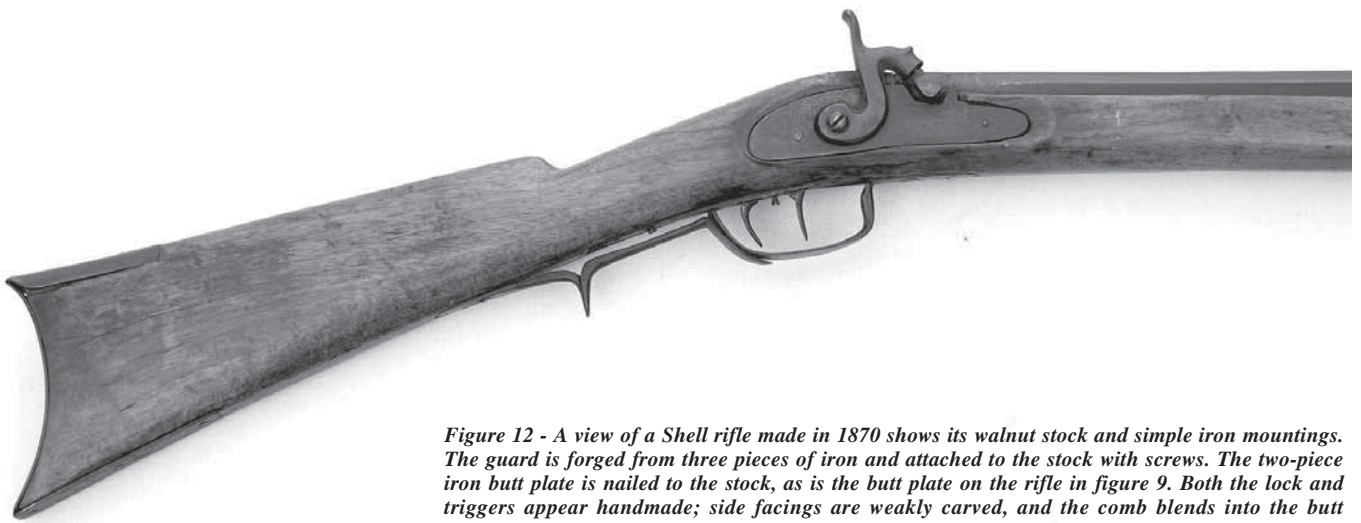


Figure 12 - A view of a Shell rifle made in 1870 shows its walnut stock and simple iron mountings. The guard is forged from three pieces of iron and attached to the stock with screws. The two-piece iron butt plate is nailed to the stock, as is the butt plate on the rifle in figure 9. Both the lock and triggers appear handmade; side facings are weakly carved, and the comb blends into the butt stock more smoothly than it does on the earlier rifle in figure 9. Courtesy J. Noble.

but perhaps demand was high after the Civil War due to so many southern arms being carried off to the battlefields, never to return. The price might also reflect the pride of the gunmaker in his work, rather than what he would actually get for the gun in cash and trade.

The barrel inscription includes “No 35,” which undoubtedly refers to the rifle being the thirty-fifth gun Shell made for resale. This number supports the idea that Shell did gunsmithing, blacksmithing, and tinkering part-time as opportunity permitted. If he began making guns at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two in Harlan County, he would have started working about 1843 or 1844 based on an 1822 birth date. He made *only* thirty-five guns over the twenty-six years between 1844 and 1870, for an average of less than one- and-a-half guns a year. In reality, he probably made more guns in his early years when demand was generally higher, and fewer guns in later years as demand softened. But the fact remains that his output was limited as a gunsmith, indicating he did other work to supplement his income.

All known guns by John Shell show that he was a late gunsmith who worked in the percussion era. Reports of early flintlock rifles made by Shell are not supported by fact or example. Such reports resulted from erroneous assumptions based on his claimed great age that, if true, would have put him in the flintlock era. His guns were good shooting arms, basic in design, and met the needs of a remote, cash-poor society in Kentucky’s southeastern hill country. Shell was neither the best nor the most prolific gunsmith in the hill country area, but his late-in-life notoriety from his proclaimed great age made him a celebrity in Kentucky and the most famous old-time gunsmith of his day.

Shell’s Legacy: Newspaper articles began to be written about Shell’s great age in 1918, and his fame spread to eastern cities. By 1919 he was invited by the State Fair Committee to the Kentucky State Fair at Louisville. Accompanied by his son Albert, William Dixon Sr., and Judge Rufus Roberts, Shell left his home on Greasy Creek by wagon and crossed Pine Mountain to Harlan, where the party boarded a train to Louisville. Shell reportedly kept his fellow travelers entertained on the trip with his backwoods yarns and philosophies. Shell proved to be an attractive figure at the fair. The party made \$175 in their first half-day, all in quarters from fairgoers who wanted to see the “world’s oldest man.” They were later moved inside a tent where they made another \$700 during the fair. Before leaving Louisville, Shell was given a ride in an airplane; after landing, he excitedly declared he would like to do it again. A 1921 article in *The New York Times* newspaper reported his great age to east coast readers. Shell became a major attraction at state and county fairs in Kentucky, and to a lesser extent in Tennessee, and he was invited to places he had never heard of. Without his celebrity status, he would have been a little known backwoods farmer, mill operator, blacksmith, and part-time gunsmith. But he gained public favor, was fawned over and treated as a celebrity, and he traveled extensively during his last years. To Shell these were exciting times that he had never experienced back in Harlan and Leslie Counties. He had a knack for storytelling before he was famous, so it was only natural that he would use those skills to build his claim of great age, as well as to generate greater public interest in himself. And he looked the part. At five feet and five inches tall and only 130 pounds, Shell looked old,

feeble, and wrinkled during his later years...how could he *not* be 130 years old as he claimed? And he had stories to back it up, such as attributing his great age to his diet of “hog, hominy, and honey.”

Shell’s death in the summer of 1922 was much like his public life. It had a real side, and it had an enhanced version for public consumption. Most accounts agree that near the end he was outside, perhaps hunting, and got caught in a cold rain. Shell was old and weak and became ill from the exposure. He died a few days later on July 5, 1922. Shell retained his mental faculties until the end and discussed funeral arrangements shortly before he died. His death was reported in *The New York Times* on July 11, 1922. The article told of Shell’s passing; in doing so it documented how far beyond Kentucky his fame had spread—all the way to New York City. Shell was buried in the Shell Burial Ground in the White Oaks area of Leslie County.

A more dramatic ending to Shell’s life, and perhaps more fitting for the “world’s oldest living man,” was circulated in Kentucky. Keep in mind that Shell was frail and weighed only 130 pounds (or less) at the time of his death, and could walk only with a cane. In this version “Uncle John” was breaking a horse to ride on his last day when supposedly 134 years old. He was thrown off, injuring his back, and he died later that night. Whether by illness or injury, the death of John Shell in 1922 closed the book on one of Kentucky’s best known backwoods celebrities and country gunsmiths. Little hard evidence is left of his handiwork, but his few brief years as a celebrity have left us with an enjoyable account of his life, undoubtedly aided by his own ability to tell a good story.

Shell's Final Interview

National Interest in Shell: The years immediately following World War I were a time of readjustment for the United States and re-evaluation of its place among the world's nations. During those years of rapid change, many Americans coped by trying to stay connected with the nation's past and its traditional values. John Shell's sudden rise to prominence in Kentucky as the nation's oldest living man offered a tangible connection to the past for many who found the early twentieth century overwhelming at times. Shell provided an image of traditional values, hard work, and self-reliance to those concerned with where the new century was taking America. The county's desire to remain connected to its past in the face of change created an environment in which Shell's claim of great age was readily accepted by most, despite his period debunkers.

Shell's true age and the story of how he came to be known as the world's oldest living man can be gleaned from interviews conducted late in Shell's life by Doctor Nascher of New York City. Doctor Nascher read about Shell's great age and decided to visit and examine Shell to verify his age, and in the process to identify the attributes of Shell, or of his life style, that led to such extraordinary longevity. He visited Shell in 1920 and conducted a medical examination and lengthy interview of the man. Other locals who knew Shell were also interviewed. Nascher eventually determined that Shell was an old, worn-out man of limited mental ability who had been manipulated, or "brainwashed," into believing he was 130 years old by a couple of local promoters who made money by exhibiting him. The results of Doctor Nascher's interviews and his conclusions regarding John Shell were turned into an article, "A Little Journey to the Home of 'The Oldest Man in The World;' Who and What He Really Is," which was published in the *Medical Review of Reviews*, January - December 1920, Volume 26, pages 291-303. Nascher had selected a rather obscure journal in which to publish his findings, so his work had little impact on the ongoing debate about Shell's age.

Visiting John Shell in 1920: Doctor Nascher was interested in John Shell's longevity and the physical prowess attributed to him in old age. Nascher initially presumed the stories of Shell's age were true, so he decided to visit Shell at his home on Greasy Creek in Leslie County, Kentucky, to find out what made this remarkable man live to such a great age and physically perform as if he were

many years younger. Nascher traveled by train to Hazard, Kentucky, which had the railroad station closest to Shell's home. The remaining trip, about twenty miles, would be made on a mule over the rough terrain. While in Hazard, Nascher asked local residents about Shell in order to begin assembling background information. He met Doctor Beyer, who had treated Shell in the past and knew a little about him. Doctor Beyer told Nascher that he did not believe Shell was as old as he claimed, and Beyer expressed doubt that Shell was the father of his adolescent son. Nascher then met and discussed Shell with a local attorney, "Judge" Faulkner, who had been a former judge, circuit rider, and attorney for Shell in the 1890s. Faulkner said he had known Shell for over thirty years, and that in 1892 Shell had become mentally deranged and remained so for several years. However, by 1897 his mind had "cleared up" sufficiently to describe boundaries and boundary posts in land disputes, and in 1911 when Faulkner was on the bench, Shell was called as a credible witness in a land suit. At that time Shell told the court that he thought he was born in the same year as Lincoln, in 1809. At Shell's second marriage in 1916, Shell told the judge he was 107 years old but did not know the year he was born in. It is worth noting that, after Shell went through a "mentally deranged" period in his early seventies, he began adding years to his

age and started claiming to be older than he really was. It was common knowledge in Shell's neighborhood that he added a "couple of years" to his age with each new birthday in later years. When promoted as "the world's oldest living man" in 1918 and later, the idea wasn't solely the invention of his promoters.

Doctor Nascher spoke to Doctor R. L. Collins of Hazard, a well-known physician in that region of Kentucky and part owner of the Hazard Hospital. Doctor Collins had seen Shell in the past and strongly doubted Shell's claim of great age. Nascher next spoke with a businessman and shop keeper from nearby Hyden, Kentucky, regarding Shell. The shopkeeper had stopped at Shell's home back in 1884 and said that at the time Shell was between sixty and sixty-five years old, and his wife was a year younger. All of Nascher's discussions with local citizens regarding John Shell pointed toward Shell being younger than his claimed age. If Shell's age claim were true, and his wife Elizabeth was one year younger than he was, then their first child, Polly, was born when Elizabeth was fifty-two years old, and the last child, Emily, was born when Elizabeth was seventy-five. Giving birth at those ages was improbable, if not impossible.

~ To Be Continued ~

Next month: *Creating the Age Myth, the Exhibition Circuit, and Dr. Nascher's evaluation of John Shell* **MB**

Now you can buy online direct from our website!

Check out the NMLRA website –
www.nmlra.org

- Shop the NMLRA online store for targets and merchandise
- Renew your membership
- Pay your NMLRA invoices
- Join the 1 of 1000 Program
- Check out the latest Longhunter photos
- Locate Charter Clubs and Territorials for shooting opportunities in your area
- Check out the Classified Ads for muzzleloading related items and supplies



We accept
MasterCard,
Visa and
Discover at
NMLRA.org

NMLRA, PO Box 67, Friendship, Indiana 47021 • 812-667-5131