

49794

## FIREARM INFORMATION SHEET

**COLLECTION NUMBER:** 9081

**TYPE:** Kentucky Rifle

**IGNITION SYSTEM:** Flint

**LOCK MARKINGS/DECORATIONS:** Signed "JA"

**DATE OF MANUFACTURE:** Circa 1810

**PLACE OF MANUFACTURE:** Emmitsburg, Maryland

**MAKER:** John Armstrong

**LENGTH OVERALL:** 57 1/4 inches

**BARREL LENGTH:** 40 3/4 inches

**CALIBER:** .42, rifled.

**WOOD TYPE:** Curly Maple

**MOUNTINGS:** Silver escutcheon at wrist, engraved silver hearts on lock and sideplate panel beavertails, typical eagle engraved silver oval on cheekpiece, remainder of engraved brass including toe plate, butt plate, trigger guard, sideplate and patchbox with three piercings. Butt plate with steel inlaid tip - typical of matured Armstrong style.

**BARREL MARKINGS/DECORATION:** Engraved brass plate with Armstrong's full signature, breech to muzzle. Decorated rear sight.

**STOCK MARKINGS/DECORATION:** Archetypal three-petal flower at rear ramrod thimble, relief carved ruffle forward of lock and lock bolt plate panels, scroll relief carving surrounding tang, extensive and typical relief carving for and aft of cheekpiece with cross-hatched panel below cheekpiece, and relief carving forward of patchbox finial.

**REPAIRS/RESTORATION:** None

**HISTORICAL/ARTISTIC SIGNIFICANCE:** A classical Armstrong rifle. John Armstrong is generally considered to be the best maker of Kentucky rifles. He excelled in all aspects needed to produce a superb Kentucky rifle, architecture, carving, engraving and metal work. He made his own barrel and locks. A full time gunsmith.

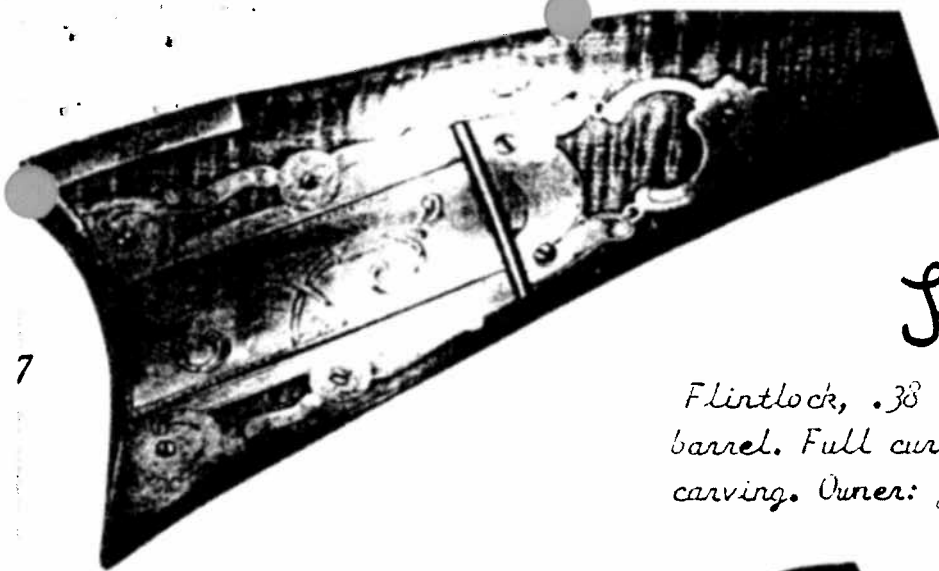
**PROVENANCE:** Ex-collection: Joe Kindig, Jr., York, Pennsylvania

Ex-collection: Warren Thomas Lewis, Evergreen, Colorado

**PUBLICATIONS:** Patchbox and signature illustrated in "Kentucky Rifle Patchboxes & Barrel Marks," by Roy F. Chandler, 1971, Volume 1, Page 41, figure #49.

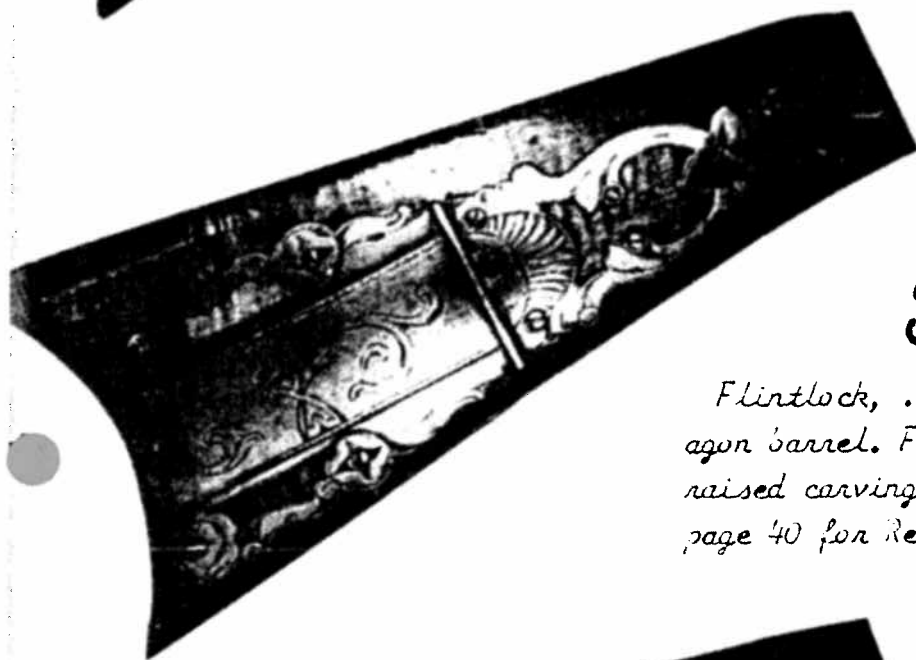
**COST:**

**ESTIMATED MARKET VALUE AND DATE:**



## John Armstrongs

Flintlock, .38 cal, 43 inch octagon, rifled barrel. Full curly maple stock with raised carving. Owner: Joe Kindig, Jr. (See pg. 40)



## John Armstrong

Flintlock, .68 cal, 42 inch rifled, octagon barrel. Full curly maple stock with raised carving. Owner: Joe Kindig, Jr. (See page 40 for Ref.)



## John Armstrong

Flintlock, .41 cal, 41 inch rifled octagon barrel. Full curly maple stock with raised carving. Owner: Joe Kindig, Jr. Ref: see page 40.

# KENTUCKY RIFLE PATCHBOXES & Barrel Marks

By: Roy F. Chandler

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1971-1972

David E. Little, Valley View Offset, Duncannon, Pennsylvania, United States of America

# John Armstrong of Emmitsburg & His Rifles *by Albert Sullivan, Sr., KRA*

*Thanks are again due KRA's past president Al Sullivan, Sr. The following article, printed in its entirety, was written by Al at the request of the Town of Emmitsburg and Mt. St. Mary's College, who were jointly preparing a salute to the Bicentennial.*

*Al agreed to do the article on the condition that after it appeared in their book, it could be published in the KRA Newsletter, and thereafter became the property of the KRA.*

*It is well to remember that the article was written to please a community in which Armstrong lived, not primarily for Kentucky Rifle Collectors.*

*The Epilogue was written after the book was published. The information therein was not available before that time to the author.*

*We think the article will be of interest to our membership.*

The town of Emmitsburg, in the State of Maryland, is cozily nestled at the foot of the Catoctin Mountain, just a few miles north of the beautiful Cunningham Falls.

It presents to the world, in its scenic setting, a calm and peaceful image. Its quiet serenity seems an integral part of the town's make-up, and suggests that to change this mood would be difficult.

Yet this tranquil dignity was abruptly shattered one Sunday last summer, as 35,000 visitors descended upon the startled little city.

They had come to see the Shrine of Mother Seton, who had that very day, been canonized in far away Rome, and had become America's first and only native-born Saint.

Elizabeth Ann Seton had wrought her magic mostly in Emmitsburg, and these visitors - pilgrims if you wish, probably felt they were achieving a sort of celestial "first-day cover" by visiting her work bench on the same day on which she was canonized.

Elizabeth Ann had focused the whole world's attention on Emmitsburg - but it is probable that only a small percentage of all the visitors who had jammed the highways leading into Emmitsburg on that Sunday, realized that the little mountain town they were visiting was the home of another famous citizen - one whose fame has spread not throughout the world, as Mother Seton's, but certainly throughout most of America.

John Armstrong, Maryland's finest and perhaps America's finest antique gunsmith, also lived and worked in Emmitsburg.

So, in its early days, Emmitsburg had a famous son, as well as a famous daughter.

And at the same time.

John was born in 1772 - Elizabeth in 1773 - and there are other interesting parallels in the lives of these two outstanding Emmitsburg residents.

As shown, they were just about the same age.

Secondly, they began their Emmitsburg careers at just about the same time - John in 1808, at least as far as documentation shows, and Elizabeth in 1809.

Then, they were practically neighbors in that they each lived in a relatively small social community.

Also, they were each beginning new enterprises at almost the same time.

Again, they were each outstanding personalities - each tops in their fields. They almost had to know each other, and knowing each other, they probably were friends.

Speculation, the friendship part, but at least with a solid foundation for support.

Then there was the fact that of the three daughters of the Armstrongs, one was named Elizabeth and one was named Ann.

Was this pure coincidence? Or was it because of respect and admiration for Mother Seton by Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong?

One more thing. Earlier in her career, Elizabeth Ann Seton opened a school for girls in the then frontier-like community, where such schools must have been rare.

The writer sometimes wonders where the Armstrong girls went to school.

Speculation or not, it is an interesting thought for an Armstrong admirer to feel that his pet gunsmith had a Saint for a friend. This certainly has to be unique.

But enough of Saint and Sinner.

Researchers have spent many hours delving for information about John Armstrong. In general, the results have been disappointing, although more has been learned about him in the last five or six years, then ever before. One basic thing that never had been documented was his birth date - until last year.

A document, now a happy part of the author's Armstrong collection, was recently discovered among some old papers at a farm, that establishes his exact birth date. This is a legal paper, part of a court record, in which John Armstrong made a deposition before a magistrate, to verify the age of one Samuel Loudon.

In the process, he tells the magistrate his birth date.

The outside of the document, when folded, states: ►

Opened, the document states: ▼

John Armstrong  
Deposition  
S. Loudons  
ccgc.

W<sup>2</sup> Fred County, Iowa  
On the 27<sup>th</sup> day of August 1878  
Personally appeared John Armstrong before me the Subscribed  
Justice of the Peace in and for Fred County aforesaid - and under  
the following Oath and Declaration - Depoeth & sayeth that he  
is perfectly well acquainted - with a certain Samuel Loudon a  
citizen of Liberty Township Adams County, I<sup>2</sup> D - that he  
does think to the best of his Opinion that the said Samuel  
Loudon was born in the year 1776. or before that year - and that  
he has good reason for forming ~~that~~ that Opinion respecting the  
Age of the said Samuel Loudon - they being boys together - but  
the said deponent - being somewhat the eldest - being born in  
the year 1770 the 5<sup>th</sup> day of September - therefore does make  
Oath and declare that the said Samuel Loudon is at least  
fifty two years of age - and further sayeth not.

Sworn before

William Henry

So here is John himself giving his birth date as September 5, 1772, to a Justice of the Peace in Frederick County, in August of 1828. This piece fits the puzzle precisely, and gives us a firm starting date. It also places him in Frederick County in 1828. But most of the pieces of the puzzle are still missing.

He does not, for instance, say *where* he was born. But he does give us a hint. He says he was a "boy together" with Samuel Loudon and he names Sam as a citizen of Liberty Township. The writer has not yet researched the exact location of Liberty Township, but feels it will be in the lower middle or lower western part of Adams County, Pennsylvania. This suggests that he was born there - and that, in turn, fits another slot in the puzzle, at least in the writer's mind.

If Armstrong was born in Liberty Township, it would mean he would have been nearer to Hanover, Pennsylvania, than if, for instance, he had been born in Emmitsburg, Maryland. And it is important to the writer's mental equanimity that he should be close to Hanover during his boyhood. The writer, and especially the writer's son (I dare not withhold this credit) have long felt that John Armstrong was apprenticed to and learned his gunsmithing from George Schroyer of Hanover.

There are at least five valid reasons for this belief.

Schroyer, one of America's oldest documented gun smiths, and one of the truly great ones, used five different features in his guns, some of them frequently, some infrequently, which appear in Armstrong's rifles. And significantly, of two of them used frequently by Schroyer, Armstrong used one all the time and the second most of the time.

Since this is being prepared not entirely for antique gun buffs, the nature of the features will not be elaborated upon. Anyone interested further may consult the writer for additional information.

So we do not believe that Armstrong was born in Emmitsburg. We think he moved there about 1793. This would be after becoming an apprentice to Schroyer in 1786, at age 14, and completing his training seven years later in 1793. He would then have become a "journeyman" and the name itself suggests that he moved away from his master and set up shop on his own - almost certainly in Emmitsburg.

Full apprenticeships in those days were normally for seven years, but not all. Some were for five years and some for only three.

If John's tenure was shorter than seven years, then he probably moved to Emmitsburg that much earlier.

One thing is certain - some of his rifles are 18th century. The writer is often asked - "If Armstrong was born when you think he was (1770 - I had thought), then where are his 18th century rifles?" The answer (clearer now that his birth date is pin-pointed) is that *any* of his flint-lock rifles could be 18th century. We have no way of telling which were

made first. We only know of four that were made as original percussions. The point is that John developed a style early in his career - in the late 18th century that pleased him - and pleased his customers, and he did not change that basic design with the passage of time.

Neither did Rolls Royce!

This is sometimes charged as a detraction against Armstrong, but the writer (admittedly biased) feels this to be an attraction, rather than a detraction.

If one spends all the money necessary to buy a Rolls Royce - or an Armstrong - one wants it, at first glance to look like a Rolls Royce - or an Armstrong.

Incidentally, that style pleases today's collectors too!

If you don't think so - try to buy one of his rifles.

But let's get back to origins. John's father, originally from England, was also named John, and apparently settled at first in the Cumberland Valley section of Pennsylvania, moving his family later (the writer hopes to uncover) to somewhere in Liberty Township. We speculate that John, Jr. could have been born there. This could fit in with John "being boys together" with his friend Sam Loudon, and would place him in close proximity to George Schroyer in Hanover. Schroyer was a generation older than Armstrong. He appears in the court records, listed as a gunsmith, as early as 1767. (But not, at that time, in Hanover)

Schroyer's age, Armstrong's nearness to him at the age boys normally began apprenticeship (John was 14 in 1786 and Schroyer was settled in Hanover at that time) and Armstrong's consistent use later of five of Schroyer's details, one of which is very conclusive, all suggest that John learned his trade from Schroyer.

John (Junior) married a Miss James. They had seven children - four sons, William, Robert, Samuel and James - and three daughters, Elizabeth, Ann and Jane.

The court records show that John bought lots 1 and 2 in the Emmitsburg plat in 1808. These are the first of a relatively long series of real estate transactions that are recorded to John.

The presumption of the writer is that Armstrong came to Emmitsburg about 1793, set himself up in the gunsmith business and by 1808 was able to buy some property, probably for a house, as well as a business and permanently established his roots. It is known that he was still in Emmitsburg as late as 1841.

Armstrong must have made a success of his business, because he enjoyed a long period of production. We are not sure just when he started but, as stated earlier, it must have been around 1793. We do know from statements made by his last apprentice, Nathaniel Rowe, that he was still in the gunsmithing business in Emmitsburg in 1840. Since he drops from sight in 1841, it seems safe to assume that his production span was from 1793 to 1840. Forty-seven years. Time enough to make a great many rifles.

The question naturally arises - and is often asked - "How many rifles did he make?"

A good question! One that cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. We can only guess. But as more is learned about the man, and about some of the factors that affect production, the guessing becomes a little easier - or rather, a little less difficult. For instance, research by Mr. Daniel Hartzler of New Windsor, Maryland, has revealed that Armstrong had a long string of apprentices. A master worker who might also be a good administrator and teacher, working with two apprentices, could naturally produce considerably more than the master working by himself. It is reasonable to suppose that Armstrong normally employed two apprentices. This is, of course, a factor which would speed-up production. But with Armstrong, there were three important factors which definitely slowed production down - and slowed it down substantially. One of these factors we are positive was always present. We are less certain of the other two, but one or both of them could also have always been present.

We are sure, for instance, that Armstrong always made his own locks. This is a slow and tedious process and would add to a rifle's completion time. Most gunsmiths of that period bought their locks from lock manufacturers. They

were cheaper and increased production. This saved the gunsmith money in two ways. Then, these locks were probably better than the average gunsmith could make himself.

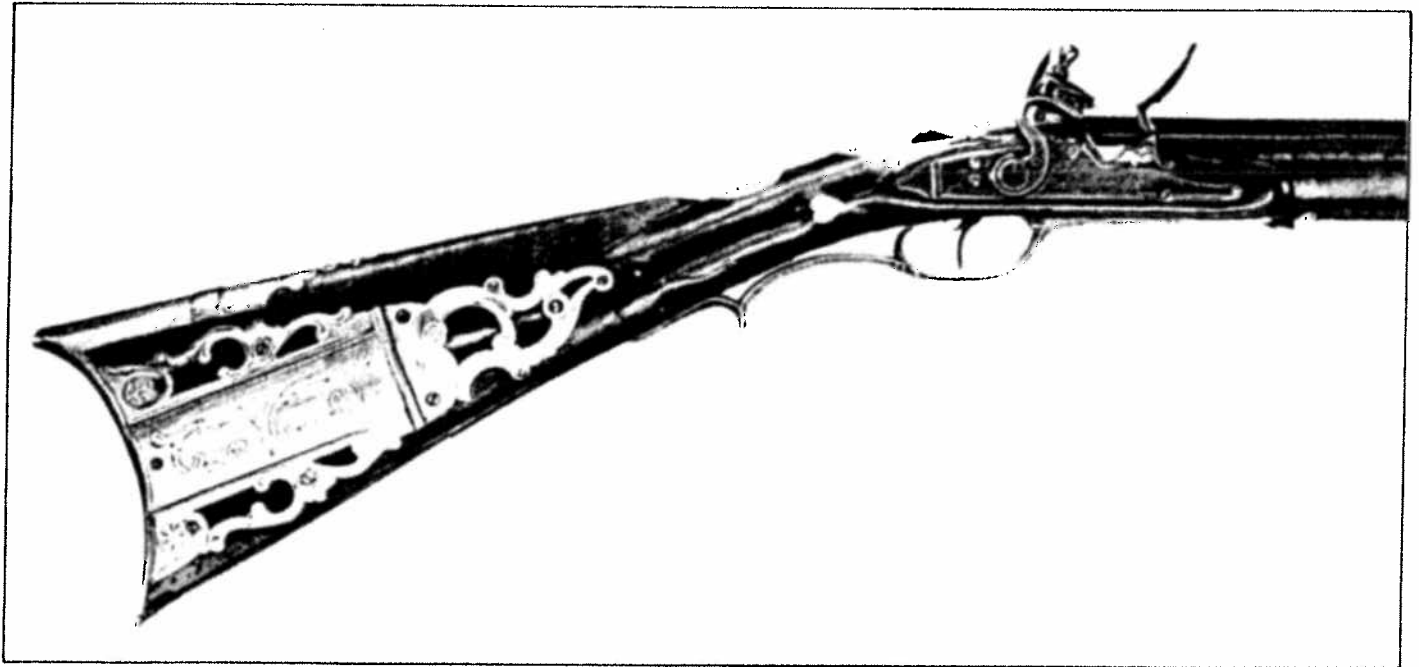
But none of these suited Armstrong. Not John Armstrong, the perfectionist! The store-bought locks were not good enough to go on his excellent products, so he made his own locks. Locks of a quality compatible with the high quality of everything else on his truly excellent rifles.

Love that man!

The locks he made are slender, graceful and beautifully proportioned. They blend perfectly into the architectural balance of the gun. It is easy to see why he would not be satisfied with anything less. Everything he did had to come up to the standards he carried in his head and in his heart, and these standards were at summit level.

In addition to their beauty, the locks functioned efficiently. The springs of the Armstrong locks in the Sullivan collection, are as crisp and sharp today as they were when they were made 150 odd years ago.

We should begin here to understand some of the reasons Armstrong is so highly regarded by collectors, and why his rifles are so eagerly sought after.



## THE "SILVER" ARMSTRONG

John Armstrong's masterpiece.

This rifle has thirteen attractive features, none of which have ever appeared on any other Armstrong.

The gun is thought to have been made for a wealthy iron-monger from the Carlisle area, who was reputed to have been related to Armstrong by marriage.

At the risk of boring our non-Armstrong buffs, we must describe one of the thirteen features, since it tells a lot about Armstrong's nature, and illustrates one of the reasons collectors regard him and his rifles so highly.

The patch box release is "concealed" in the upper patch box plate - that is, it is made to look like the matching silver inlay on the bottom plate. This bottom inlay is solid. The one on the top when depressed, releases the latch which secures the patch box lid. In order to make this release work smoothly, Armstrong made a complex arrangement on the under side of the upper patch box plate, consisting of a brass cylinder, a piston, a stop and a spring. As a result, the release has a smooth positive action.

This arrangement is not present on any other Armstrong rifle. In fact, I have never known it to be on any other Kentucky rifle.

But the crowning touch is that the workmanship, which is entirely unseen, and would only be known by another gunsmith who might be working on the gun (which is how it was discovered), is just as meticulously made and beautifully crafted as any of the parts that are visible.

Incidentally, there is a feeling, a very sensible one, in the Kentucky rifle fraternity, that the absence of the original lock in a Kentucky rifle is not too important. This is because the lock was almost never made by the gunsmith and so did not represent his handiwork. Also, locks were expendable. They wore out and they were replaced, so they seldom related to the gunsmith who made the rifle.

But this does not hold with Armstrong. Because he made and signed his own locks, and because they were so special and were so appropriate to his guns, this absence of an Armstrong lock in an Armstrong rifle is a very serious flaw.

So hand-made locks slow production.

The other two factors that would seriously affect the gunsmith's out-put are the barrel, if self-made, and the brass castings.

There were a number of barrelsmiths who did nothing but make barrels for use by various gunsmiths. Most craftsmen of that period purchased and used such barrels.

But not Armstrong!

The writer believes he made his own barrels. This would, of course, have limited his production. But Armstrong was more interested in perfection than he was in production. This is attested by the fact that he never made a poor rifle. Some of the other rifle-makers who could rival him for the top-spot, did make rifles of lesser quality - adjusted, no doubt, to suit what the customer could afford to pay. But not our hero. He never removed the suit of shining armor - never got down off the white horse.

Of the twenty-eight surviving Armstrong rifles known to the writer, the least of them is an excellent example of design and execution. It is a truly fine rifle - one that any discerning collector would be proud to own.

The barrel played such an important role in accuracy, that Armstrong would never have been satisfied to leave control of this vital function to someone else.

The writer has examined a number of these barrels with this particular question in mind, and has concluded, at least to his own satisfaction, that Armstrong made his own barrels.

Again, a production lag.

As to casting his own brass fittings, we are not quite so sure. The brass furniture affected the efficiency of the gun only in that it had to be comfortable to the marksman. This was much less important to the gun's ultimate purpose - accuracy - than the barrel. Its principle contribution - besides comfort, was to please the eye, so you may conclude he did leave the castings to someone else. But our boy was an artist - a true artist. His devotion to beauty is proven by what he has left behind. It is doubtful that he regarded appearance as being of secondary importance. So the writer thinks he made his castings himself.

Another indication that he made his own castings is the fact that a number of his trigger guards have the initials

"J.A." cast into the metal on the inside of the bow. This does not prove he made them, but it certainly proves they were made exclusively for him, and to his strict specifications.

But we have begged the question long enough.

How many rifles did John Armstrong make?

Considering all the above, plus the engraving, carving and finishing, and assuming he used two apprentices most of the time, we believe he could not produce his type of gun in anything less than three weeks. This is only seventeen rifles per year. If this seems low, consider this - only twenty-eight Armstrong rifles are known to exist! Perhaps there are another six or eight around that have not surfaced, so let's say there are thirty-six remaining.

If full production was seventeen per year, then forty-seven years of production would result in - say eight hundred rifles. But no manufacturer that ever lived, then or now, has ever achieved full production over a forty-seven year span. Assuming that his chief occupation during that span was making rifles (which we don't really know), it would appear reasonable to reduce the production rate by at least 25%. This would then give a total of six hundred rifles in his lifetime.

But we do not believe he made that many. If he had, more of them would have survived. Thirty-six represents a survival rate of only 6%. It may be argued that the Kentucky rifle is a very fragile object and that a survival rate of 6% over a one hundred fifty year span is reasonable.

And normally we would agree. But Armstrong rifles are not normal. They are at the top of the heap and fine objects usually receive better care than the ordinary. Consequently, the survival rate is higher. Perhaps 50% higher. If so, the thirty-six survivors would then represent 9% of the total production. This would make Armstrong's life-time production about four hundred rifles.

This is a long answer to the question, and we are not at all sure we have answered it. The only thing really sure is that any answer will be contested.

At any rate, this is our thinking - four hundred rifles!

We mentioned the fact that Armstrong took in apprentices.

It was known for a long time that Nathaniel Rowe, also of Emmitsburg, was an apprentice to Armstrong. But it has only recently come to light that he was Armstrong's last apprentice. Ed and Helen Flanagan of nearby Thurmont, profound scholars and indefatigable researchers, have discovered Rowe's tombstone. Fortunately, the stone gives his birth date, and this fact alone solves a number of puzzles.

Before this discovery, collectors felt there were two Nathaniel Rowes - possibly Senior and Junior. This was because of the marked difference in two styles of Rowe rifles. The first was of 18th century styling and followed almost exactly the makeup of Armstrong's guns. This was con-



sidered natural, since he was apprenticed to the master and would make guns that resembled those of his teacher. These were thought to be the work of the Senior Rowe.

The second style, also signed by Nathaniel Rowe, was of a much later vintage - around the middle 1800's. This, then, would be the work of Junior. But the Flanagans have discovered that this is not the case. Their research has turned up only one Nathaniel Rowe, despite the large size of the Rowe clan in that area.

The important thing they learned was that Rowe was born late and lived a long time.

He was born in 1821 and died in 1915. He became an apprentice in 1836, when he was fifteen years old. By Rowe's own words, he began with Armstrong when he was fifteen, and stated that his tenure was for five years. This would have made Armstrong sixty-nine years of age when Rowe completed his training, and the year would be 1841 - very close to the end of Armstrong's career.

So the obvious facts are that Rowe only made a small number of the early Armstrong-type rifles - the writer knows of only five - and then switched to the style which was at that time fashionable. Perhaps he made these few Armstrong-type rifles during the short space between his becoming a journeyman and Armstrong's death.

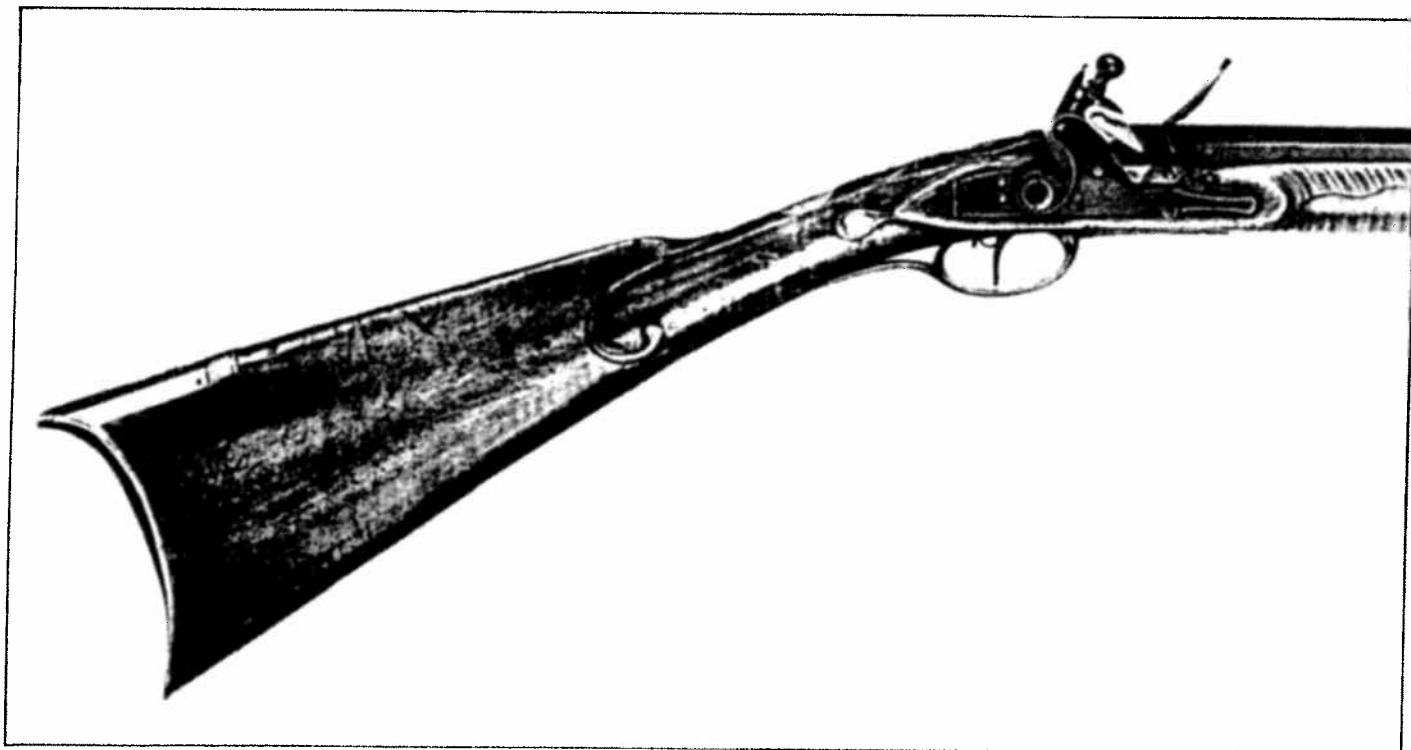
The Flanagans have also discovered that one George Piper was apprenticed to Armstrong in 1801.

This could very well have been Armstrong's first apprentice. The writer has seen one rifle made by George Piper. It bears but little resemblance to John's style.

Another puzzle concerning the early apprentices of Armstrong has been cleared up because of the research of Dr. George Shumway.

Four or five rifles were known that were signed Wickham & Matthews. The rifles, from their styling, were obviously Maryland rifles. One of them, owned by a friend of the writer, is an extremely fine rifle of great beauty. The rifle has so much of Armstrong in it that it was almost a certainty that the makers knew, or were associated with Armstrong. But who was Wickham - who was Matthews? No one seemed to know. Nothing appeared in the records. Then Dr. Shumway, in his systematic research, found evidence that Wickham was Marine Tyler Wickham, who is well known in antique militaria and for whom the "Wickham Band" is named. The document shows that he was one of Armstrong's very early apprentices. After leaving Armstrong, Wickham became U.S. Inspector of Arms during the War of 1812 and later, under contract, manufactured Model 1821 muskets for the Army.

Between these early and last apprentices, Armstrong must have had a constant stream of young men in training. It is said that all four of his sons were apprentices at one time or other. Some evidence of this is shown in a rifle, examined by the writer, which is signed "Samuel Armstrong". It is a



#### ARMSTRONG FOWLER

A rare piece. One of only three known and the only one actually seen by the writer.

This shot gun is very different from Armstrong's rifles. However, he has managed to retain the same grace, balance and beauty that characterize his rifles.

rather mediocre copy of the master's style. Another rifle is said to be signed by "Robert Armstrong", and is thought to be made by another of Armstrong's sons. Apparently the boys did not follow in the master's footsteps for any length of time.

The two Armstrong apprentices who did prove to be great gunsmiths in their own right were, of course, Marine Tyler Wickham and Nathaniel Rowe.

There has been a general feeling that Armstrong was a poor business man and lived a hand-to-mouth existence.

This was probably true of many gunsmiths, and the tag was likely applied to John because of the sale of some gunsmithing tools and equipment in 1822. Most researchers and many collectors are aware of this recorded sale, and some think he went out of business at that time. We now know the latter is not true. For one thing, the writer's son has an Armstrong that is dated - the only one known - November 1826.

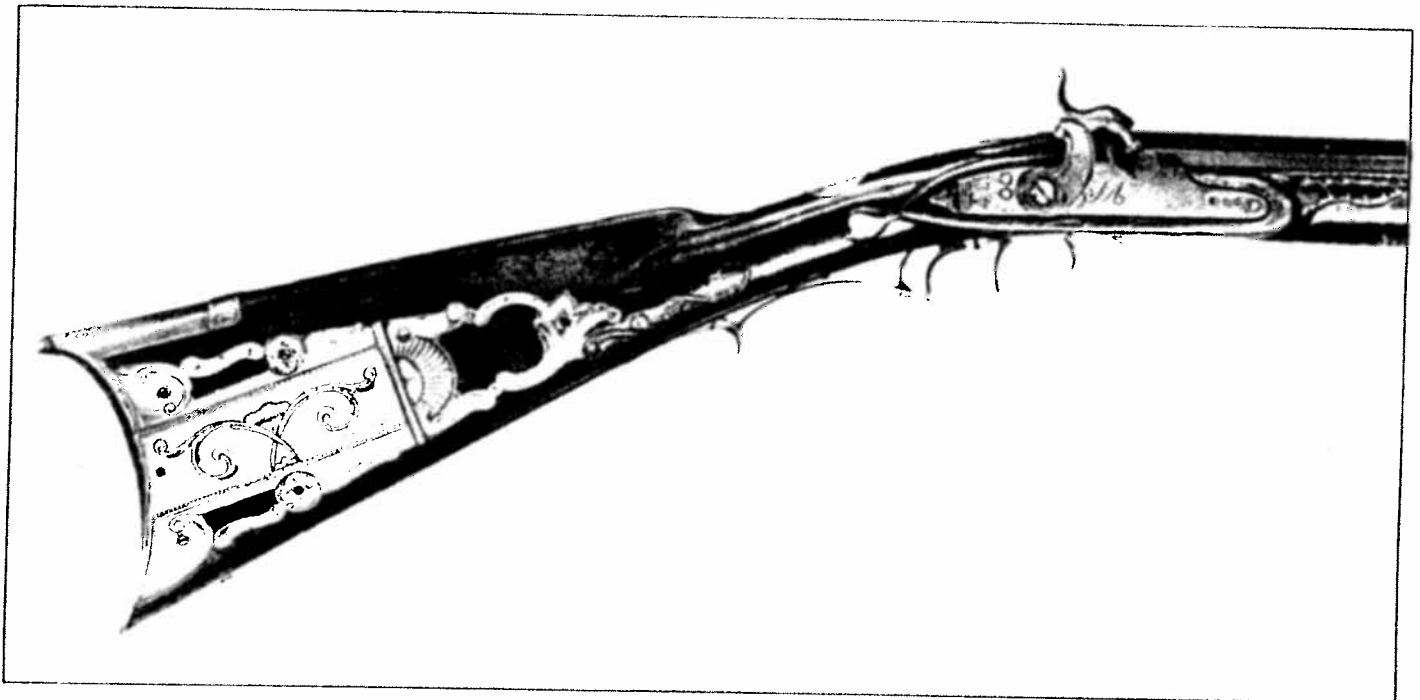
Nor do we think the sale was made because he was hard-up and desperately needed cash. It is more likely he had an over-supply of tools and was selling them to help someone else get started in business. Not to Jacob Harner, to whom the sale is recorded, but possibly for one of his graduated apprentices. Perhaps Harner himself was an earlier apprentice.

It is not likely that a gunsmith that employed a long continuous string of apprentices would be having a bad time economically. Taking on an apprentice in those days was somewhat like adopting another son - and with four of his own, Armstrong certainly did not need another son. The master was charged not only with teaching the lad his trade, but also in supplying his material needs. Very often the apprentice lived in the master's house as one of the family.

Moreover, again thanks to the research of Dr. Shumway, some of the real estate deals that are recorded are in four digit figures. This at a time when most ordinary transactions were in the low three digit range. According to Dr. Shumway, several of these real estate deals were made with Samuel Loudon, John's boyhood friend.

It is reasonably certain that John Armstrong took adequate care of his family, and lived comfortably.

Armstrong's rifles are among the very finest of the Kentucky's "Golden Age". This ran from about 1790 to 1820, a period following the Revolution, when the Country was glutted with gunmakers, but shy of gun-buyers. To stay in business, a gunsmith had to build finer and finer rifles to attract his share of the dwindled demand.



### PERCUSSION ARMSTRONG

This rifle is interesting to Armstrong buffs for several reasons. One, it is dated, the only one ever found. The date - November 1826, tells us that Armstrong was still making rifles at that time. Two, the gun was made in percussion (one of four known), and shows that Armstrong did make percussion rifles. Three, it proves that he was mentally flexible, and had adjusted to the new-fangled ignition.

And more important, it shows that Armstrong did not lower his standards one iota with advanced age and the coming of the machine age.

Indeed, this piece is fully up to his flint-lock standards and even contains several refinements that are not present on many of his flint lock rifles.

Armstrong learned his trade and then started his business in this atmosphere of excellence, motivated by the grim certainty that gunsmiths either made a superior rifle or their business perished.

It was first-rate training, but it is doubtful that Armstrong needed such a push. With his tremendous talent, his innate artistry and his desire for perfection, he probably would have made a superb rifle under any circumstances.

One way or another, his products were among the very best. His rifles were long, slender and graceful. Their architectural balance is excellent. His guns hang together - they please the eye - at first glance they start the acquisitive juices flowing. This quality is difficult to put into words, but it has a slam-bang effect on the beholder. A gut reaction.

Not many gunsmiths had this magic, but all students of the Kentucky rifle will agree that Armstrong had more than his share.

The late Joe Kindig, Jr., dean of all Kentucky collectors, in his remarkable book "Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in Its Golden Age", says of Armstrong -

"John Armstrong's workmanship is magnificent and his designs are just about perfection.

I cannot over-emphasize the beauty of his rifles."

Emmitsburg, especially during the Bicentennial Year can be proud of her talented son, who began life just four years before the period started. ●

#### EPILOGUE

In the foregoing article, the writer concludes from logical deductions, that John Armstrong and Mother Seton must have known each other.

Documentation of the fact was furnished, unknown to the author, at the same time the Armstrong article was published - and in the same book.

The book, a salute to the Bicentennial by the City of Emmitsburg and the Mt. St. Mary's College, is entitled "Emmitsburg: History and Society."

In the book appears an article by Sister John Mary Crumlish, D.C., entitled "Mother Seton And Her Neighbors." Sister John Mary is the Archivist for St. Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg.

At one point she states - "While responsible for maintaining a free school and boarding academy, a sisterhood and a farm, Mother Seton had much business contact with her neighbors, male and female, slave and free. Her receipt book, still preserved at St. Joseph's Provincial House, witnesses transactions with John Armstrong, the master of the Emmitsburg Rifle School, etc."

Needless to say, this documentary confirmation of the writer's supposition was joyfully received.

Sister John Mary, in response to a letter from this scribe, has kindly furnished us with additional information concerning business documentation between Mother Seton and John Armstrong.

The receipt referred to was written directly into the receipt book by Armstrong himself - giving us only the second known example of his handwriting and signature.

This example lends further support to the belief that those gunsmiths who were skilled engravers, duplicated their handwriting when they engraved their signature on the barrel of their rifles.

From the photocopy, one sees that Armstrong's engraved signature is almost identical to his handwriting.

This gracious lady, Sister John Mary, has furnished us with five other references to John Armstrong which appear in the account books of the religious community:

May 20, 1825. He placed a cast steel eye in a shuttle, and replaced a door lock.

October 21, 1835. His bill cites repairing a lock and mending a key.

October 1, 1838. He charged for repairing screws for a guitar and a key for a piano.

August 12, 1839. He submitted a bill for mending a key.

March 13, 1841. John Armstrong charged for mending a key for a chest lock.

Still another account book contains transaction with John Armstrong.

On June 19, 1828, he receipted a bill for repairing a door lock. He duplicated this on October 14, 1835.

For a period of 28 years, Armstrong seemed to have been the locksmith and machinist who met the needs of the St. Joseph's religious establishment.

This documentation of Armstrong's activities in fields unrelated to gun-making, supplies further evidence of the belief that gunsmiths, especially those who remained in one locality for a long period, became, aside from making rifles and fowlers, sort of local blacksmiths and mechanical repair men who took care of any community needs for which their talents were suited.

The writer has in his collection, two reaping hooks made and signed by well-known gunsmiths, and knows of a beautifully made pancake spatula, also made by an ancient riflemaker.

One other thing I must repeat from Sister John Mary's letter.

In one place she says - and I quote:

"The utter esthetic quality of John Armstrong's rifles has always captivated me ...."

I can't think of a better ending.

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JOHN ARMSTRONG

"GUNSMITH"

EMMITTSBURG, MARYLAND

My research into the lives of the early riflesmiths of Pennsylvania and neighboring states reveals a very common fact that these great gunsmiths or artisans of wood and metal were very poor businessmen. Our gunsmith of this article, John Armstrong, was no exception. In the last years of his life he lived in very bad financial straits as I will reveal to you.

John Armstrong's guns are really among the most prized of collectors. They were beautifully balanced, graceful, exquisitely carved and inlaid in the best possible workmanship. His guns did not vary greatly one from the other. Some had more raised carving and silver inlay than others, but I have never seen a very plain Armstrong Rifle.

John Armstrong was the son of John Armstrong the 1st, who came from England and settled in Cumberland Valley, Pennsylvania. It is not known whether or not John Junior learned his gunsmithing from his father. It is the writer's belief that he was trained in the York school of riflesmiths. John Junior had married a Miss James. She bore him four sons and three daughters. The sons were William, Robert, Samuel and James. William was the only son that married.

All four sons were trained by their father to become gunsmiths. William left Maryland to become an inspector of arms at Harper's Ferry arsenal. I have seen a rifle marked Samuel Armstrong. The signature upon the top of the octagon barrel was similar in script to his father's signature. The workmanship was not as graceful as his father, but very well executed. I have never seen any guns by any of the other sons of John Armstrong, Jr.

The last entry of many in the records of John Armstrong's legal recordings is January 4, 1842. In the courthouse at Frederick, Maryland, beginning December 17, 1763, Book J, Page 48, is the first record of John Armstrong selling property to Thomas Snowden. I am of the opinion that this transaction is that of John Armstrong, Sr., father of John the gunsmith. If it were not John, Sr., then to own property one had to be 21 years of age and that would have placed the birth of John, the gunsmith, possibly back to 1741. The last entry was January 4, 1842, one hundred and one years later, this age would hardly have been probable. The life span of a man in 1840 was approximately 40 years, which would have placed our gunsmith's birth approximately 1800. In these same courthouse records, dated April 2, 1822, Volume 16, Page 434, John Armstrong, Jr. recorded a mortgage to Samuel Loudon for property valued at \$846. From

1822 to 1842 are recorded six transactions. On November 16, 1822, Volume 16, Page 748, is found a record of his sale of his gunsmithing tools to Jacob Harner for \$28.00. We have reproduced this sale in part as follows:

"At the request of Jacob Harner the following Bill of Sale is recorded 6th November 1822,

Know all men by these presents, that I John Armstrong of Frederick County State of Maryland, for and in consideration of the sum of twenty eight dollars current money to me in hand paid by Jacob Harner of the same county at or before the sealing and delivery of these present, the receipt whereof I the said John Armstrong do hereby acknowledge have granted, bargained, and sold and by these presents, do grant, bargain and sell unto the said Jacob Harner his executors, administrators and assigns all the goods and implements herein mentioned Viz. forty gun stocks, one pair Smiths bellows, one anvil, two vices, one large pair of sheers, three directors for rifleing together with all the other tools and implements necessary for carrying on the Gun Smith trade - All which said goods and implements are now in my possession. To have and to hold all and singular the said goods and implements mentioned or intended so to be, to the said Jacob Harner his executors, administrators and assigns forever, and the said John Armstrong for myself, my heirs, executors and administrators all and singular the said goods and implements unto the said Jacob Harner his executors, etc."

Why John Armstrong sold his tools at this date is not known. He apparently met with financial reverses because on February 4, 1828, six years later, he took a mortgage to buy a tin plate stove and pipe, agreeing to pay in one year in the amount of \$2.50. Alas, a wonderful mechanic but a poor business man.

Where John Armstrong died and when is not known, but it is the writer's opinion that he wandered from Emmittsburg, Maryland, up and over into Bedford County, where he taught those fine gunsmiths the grace of lock and stock that he was so proficient in making. Armstrong's late guns are the prototype of the Bedford County Rifle.

Unfortunately, this is all I can find documented on the life of this great gunsmith. His rifles that remain are great examples of his ability as an artist among gunsmiths.

S. E. Dyke

January 20, 1965

# THOUGHTS ON THE KENTUCKY RIFLE IN ITS GOLDEN AGE



*"All manifestation  
must be born through the heart."*

*This book was born  
through the loving efforts of*  
MARY ANN CRESSWELL, *Editor*  
SAMUEL E. DYKE, *Research*  
HENRY J. KAUFFMAN, *Research*  
JOHN E. GROOME, *Printer*  
GEORGE N. HYATT, *Publisher*  
JOE KINDIG, JR.  
BLUFORD W. MUIR, *Photographer*

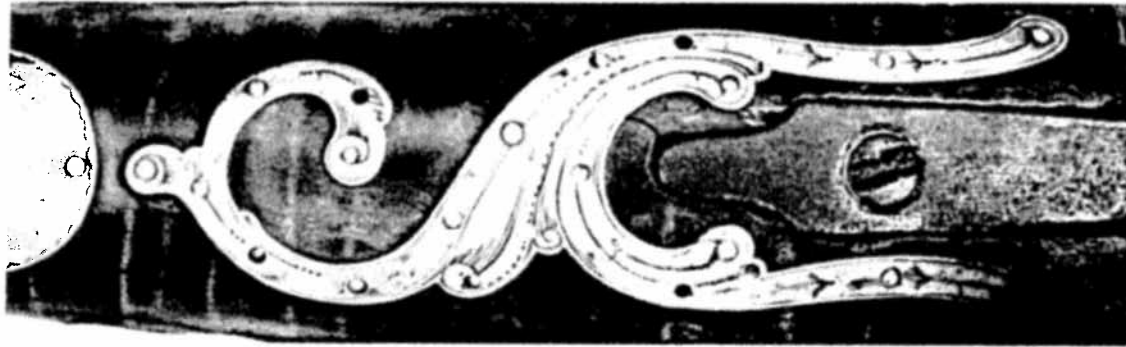
*These also helped:*  
LEE E. BOYER, WILLIAM E. FLORENCE,  
RAYMOND A. FREY, HAROLD L. PETERSON, CARL PIPPERT, CHESTER L. STAGEMYER,  
SARINA STEELE, WES WHITE.

*It could not have been conceived  
but for the pioneering of*  
HORACE KEPHART, CHARLES WINTHROP SAWYER, CAPT. JOHN G. W. DILLIN,  
JOHN HUSTON, MARK WOODMANSEE, DR. THOMAS B. SNYDER, CHARLES D. COOK,  
WILLIAM JACOBS, CARMAN MYERS  
*and many others.*

*There is still much pleasant work  
to be done in this field  
for any who care to labor.*







*Beautifully engraved silver inlay of design usually carved at barrel tang by J. Armstrong*

## John Armstrong

From the history of Emmitsburg, Maryland, we read that John Armstrong was a gunsmith in Emmitsburg in 1808. He owned lots #1 and #2 in the town at that date. The Frederick County Courthouse records that on September 9, 1822, John Armstrong took a mortgage on a plot of land in Shields, an addition to Emmitsburg. This was lot #12 on the town platt. On November 6, 1822, John Armstrong sold Jacob Harner "forty gun stocks, one pair of smith bellows, one anvil, two vises, one large pair of shears, three directors for rifling, together with all the other tools and implements necessary for carrying on the gunsmith trade, all of which goods and implements are now in my possession" for twenty-eight dollars. This suggests that John Armstrong discontinued gunsmithing in 1822, but I do not know this to be the case. In 1838 he bought lot #7 on the town platt in Shields for \$300, and on October 5 of that year he took a \$300 mortgage on this lot which by then had a one-story brick house and a wooden shed on it. In 1841 he took another \$100 mortgage on the property.

In Williams *History of Frederick County, Maryland*, we find the following information concerning John Armstrong. There is no reason to doubt any of this information, but we should remember that it is not contemporary. His father, John Sr., came from England and settled in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania. John Jr. was a gunsmith, a whitesmith, and a master mechanic who settled near Emmitsburg, Maryland. He married a Miss James. They had four sons—William, Robert, Samuel, and James—all of whom are supposed to have been gunsmiths. William was an inspector of arms at the Harper's Ferry Arsenal. I have seen one rifle signed "Samuel Armstrong." John Armstrong also had three daughters—Anna, Jane, and Elizabeth. It would be very interesting if we could prove that one of these girls married one of her father's apprentices. I have one later rifle signed "P. Lapold" that is very similar to John Armstrong's work.

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tically the same. When he did change a detail, it was only a minor detail. Then he used the new version for a very long time before making another change.

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John Armstrong made beautiful patch boxes. They do not have many piercings—generally three—although two of these rifles have five piercings each. He made a rather large stock and a very large patch box that nearly covers the side of the stock. His patch boxes are beautifully designed with the outline formed by the engraved details. John Armstrong was a master engraver in both design and execution. The four patch boxes illustrated are very similar in engraved design. Four others have heads like Nos. 205 and 208. Rifle No. 206 is the only one of the nine that has this type of head. One other has a head like No. 207. Four other patch box lids are engraved similarly to Nos. 205, 206, and 208; and all of these are engraved similarly to the Kopp Rifle No. 203. One other lid is engraved like No. 207 which is somewhat similar to the Kopp gun No. 201. Five others have upper and lower plates like Nos. 205 and 206; and rifle No. 208 is identical to these except that it has two more piercings in the plates. The upper and lower plates on No. 207 are similar to those by Andrew Kopp. The engraving on all of these elements is very good but very much the same.

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John Armstrong was just as good a stocker and carver as he was a metal worker. He used good to extremely fine curly maple in all his guns. In fact, he was one of the gunsmiths who used the best curly maple at times. He made a long slender gun with the slenderness accentuated by very fine forestock molding and a pronounced comb. The carved detail extending back from the front of the comb on both sides of the stock accentuates the high comb and carries the wrist down toward the butt. The very fine relief carving forward of the cheek piece and forward of the patch box is practically identical on all nine guns. It shows best in the photographs of gun No. 208. This carving and the little detail above it which accentuates the high comb are quite beautifully executed. Seven of these guns have good relief carving to the rear of the rear ramrod pipe in one of two types of design. Three others also have a carved detail in front of the side and lock plates adjacent to the barrel as on Nos. 205 and 208. All nine guns have a nice high cheek piece with a simple molding on the edge. All nine also have a segment of an oval under the cheek piece, and eight of them have cross-hatching in this segment. His carving to the rear of the cheek piece is always very similar in design. It is beautifully executed in high relief and consists of nicely flowing C-scrolls. All nine rifles are well covered with carving in this area. Two others are carved like No. 206, and No. 208 is identical with just a slight addition. Two carved details in this area are identical to No. 205. Rifle No. 207 varies slightly here, and one other gun is very similar to it but also slightly different. John Armstrong was a master carver. His beautifully designed and extremely well executed carving flows in unusually graceful curves standing in high relief.

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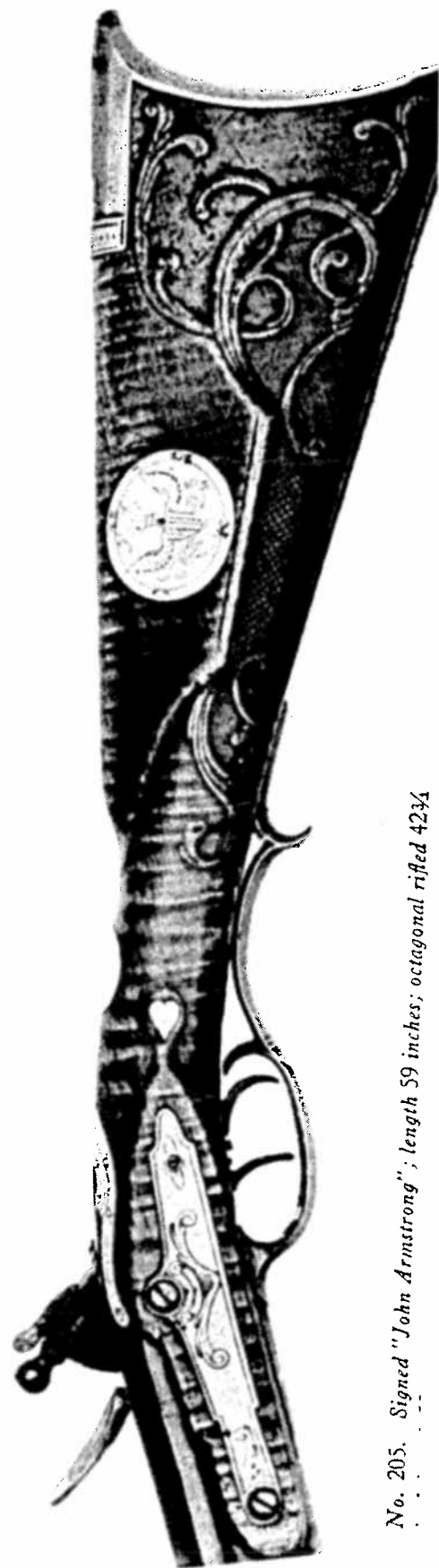
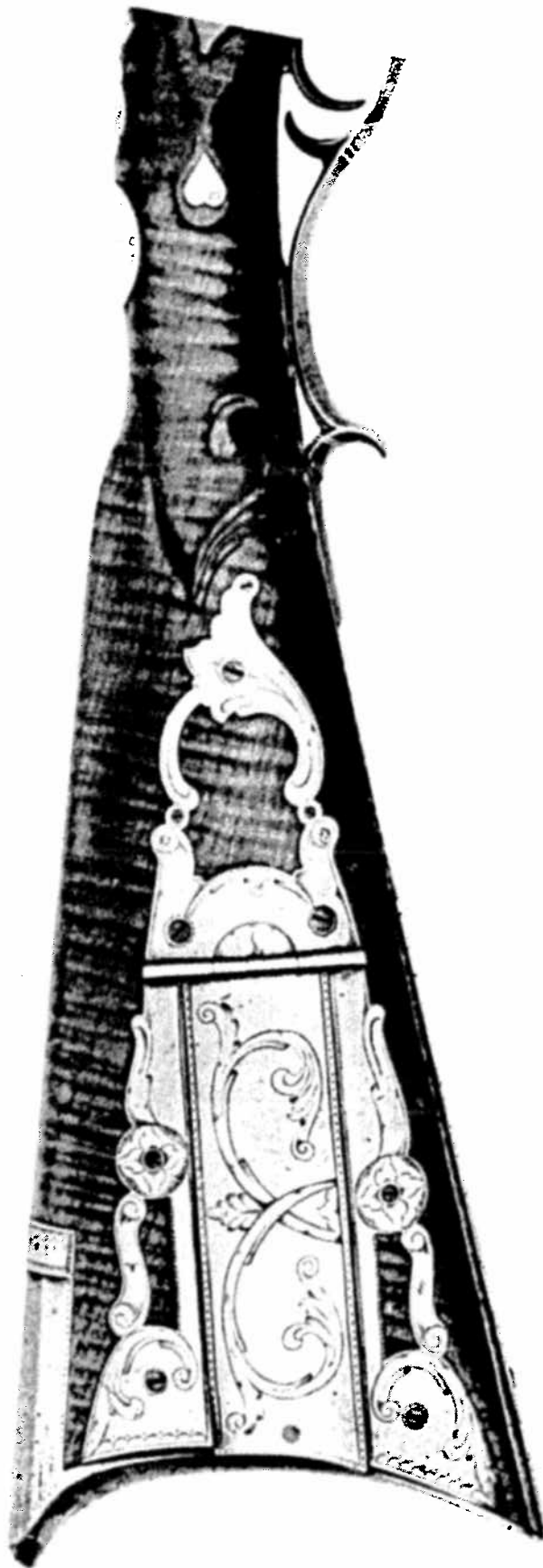
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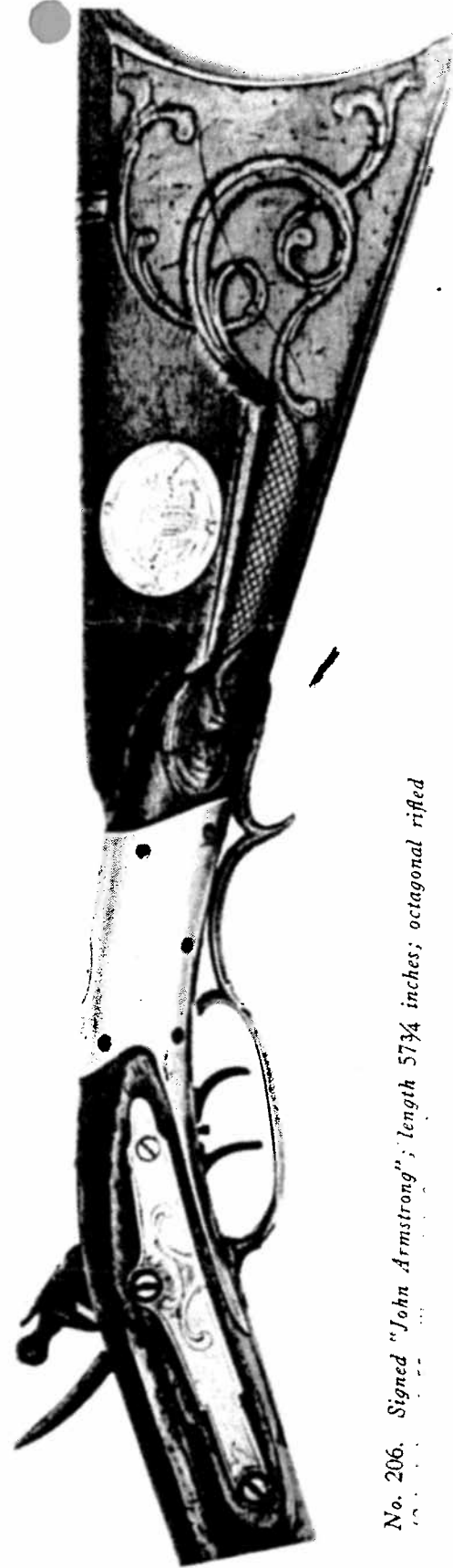
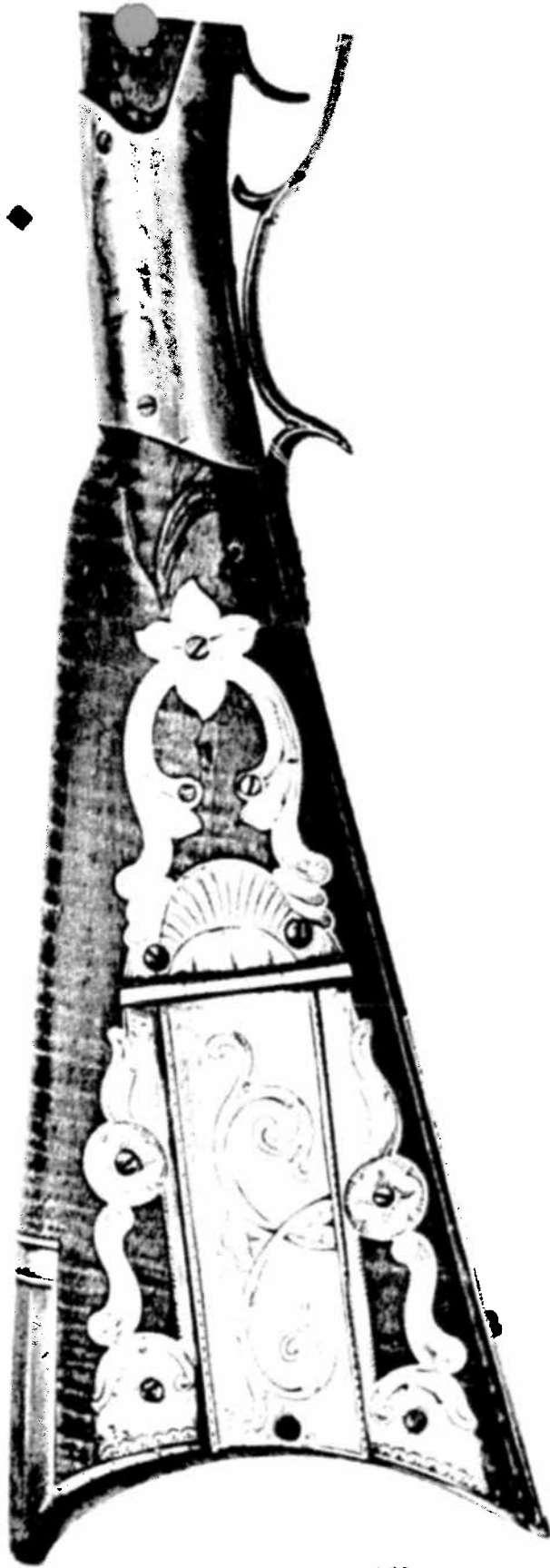
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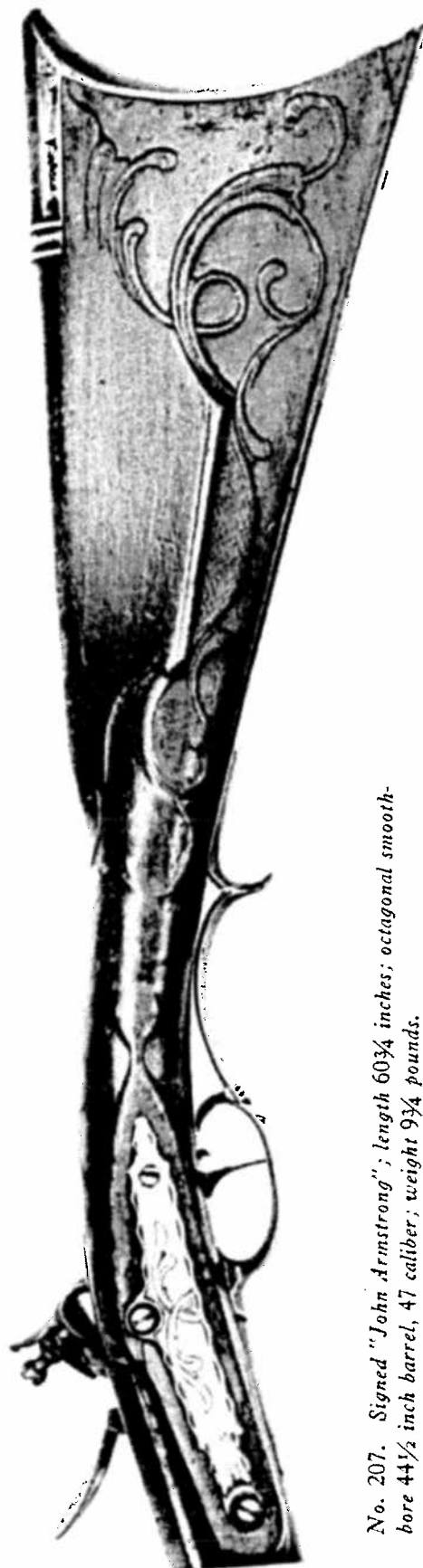
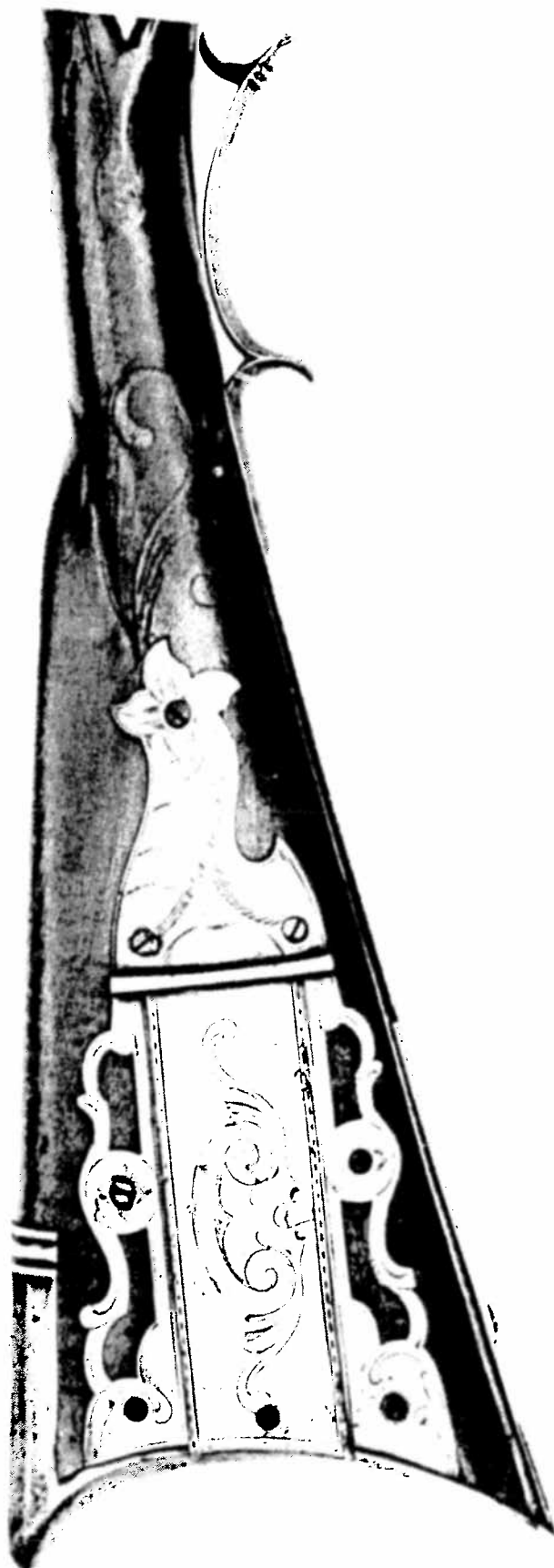
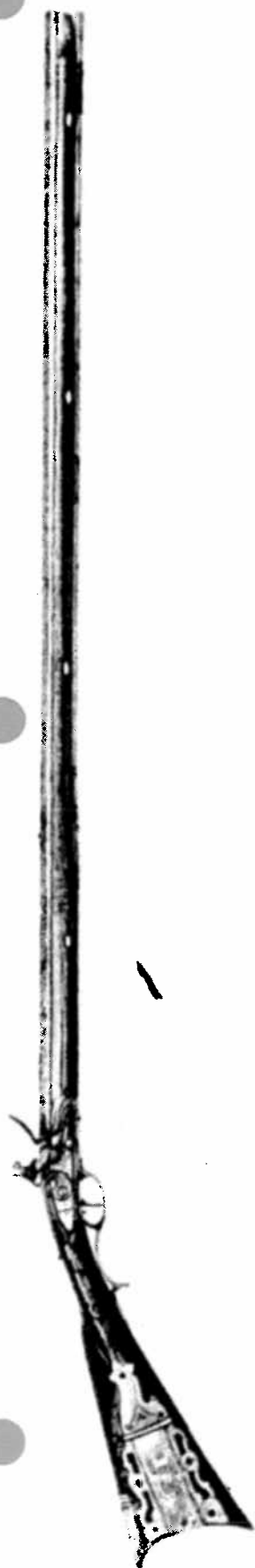


No. 205. Signed "John Armstrong"; length 59 inches; octagonal rifled 42 $\frac{3}{4}$

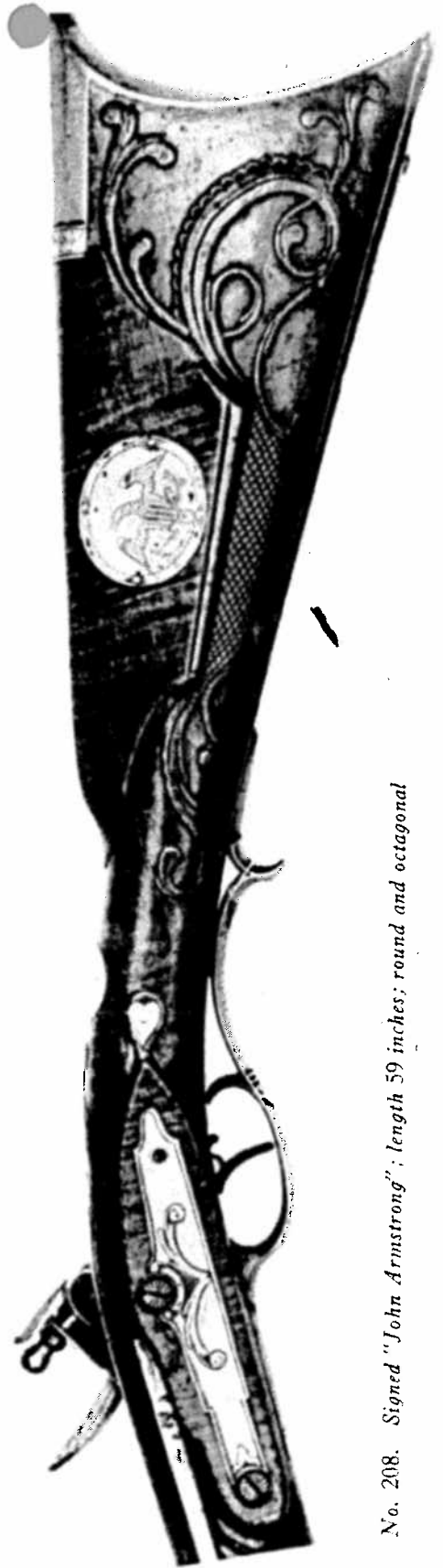
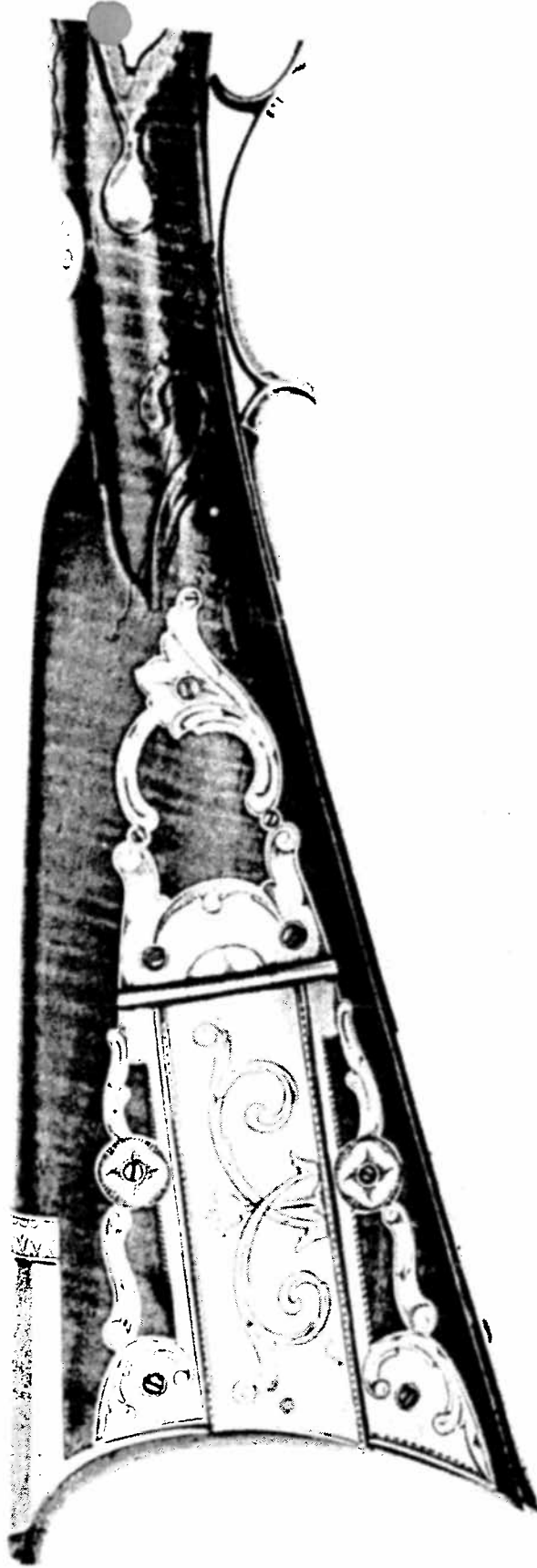
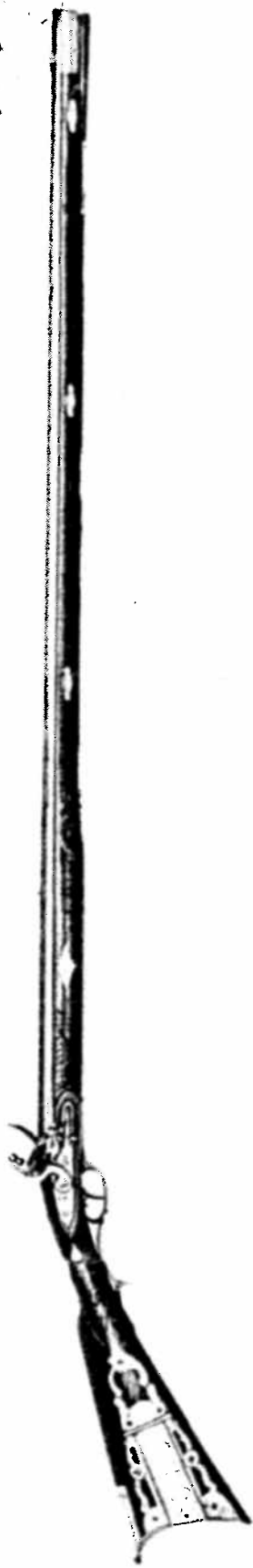


450

No. 206. Signed "John Armstrong"; length  $57\frac{3}{4}$  inches; octagonal rifled



No. 207. Signed "John Armstrong"; length 60¾ inches; octagonal smooth-bore 44½ inch barrel, 47 caliber; weight 9¾ pounds.







*Beautifully engraved silver inlay of design usually carved at barrel tang by J. Armstrong*

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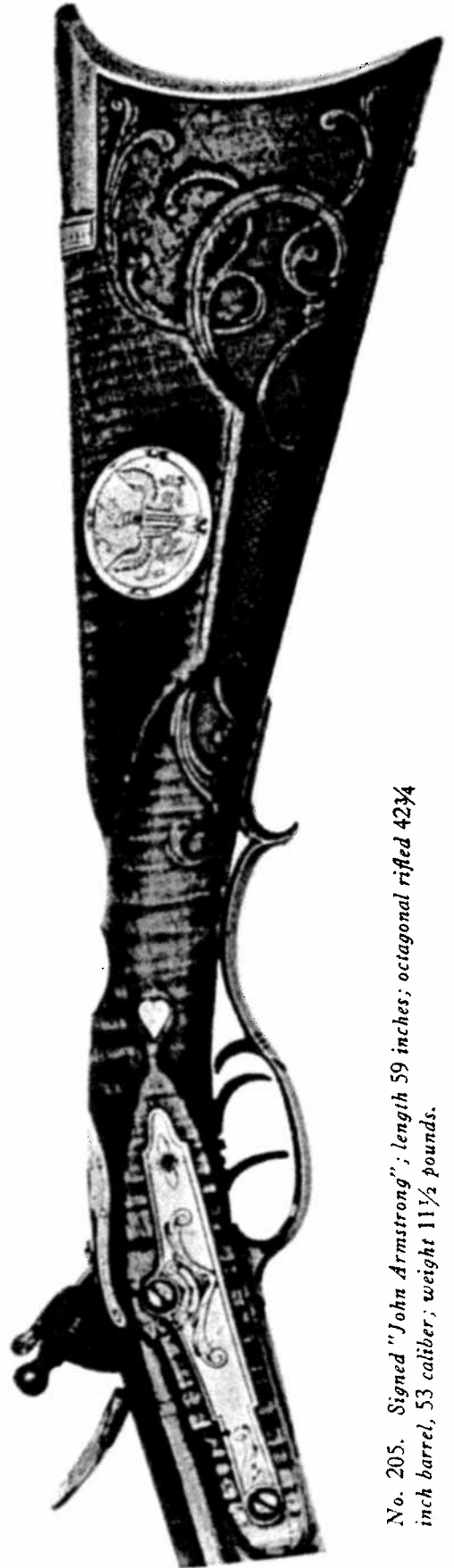
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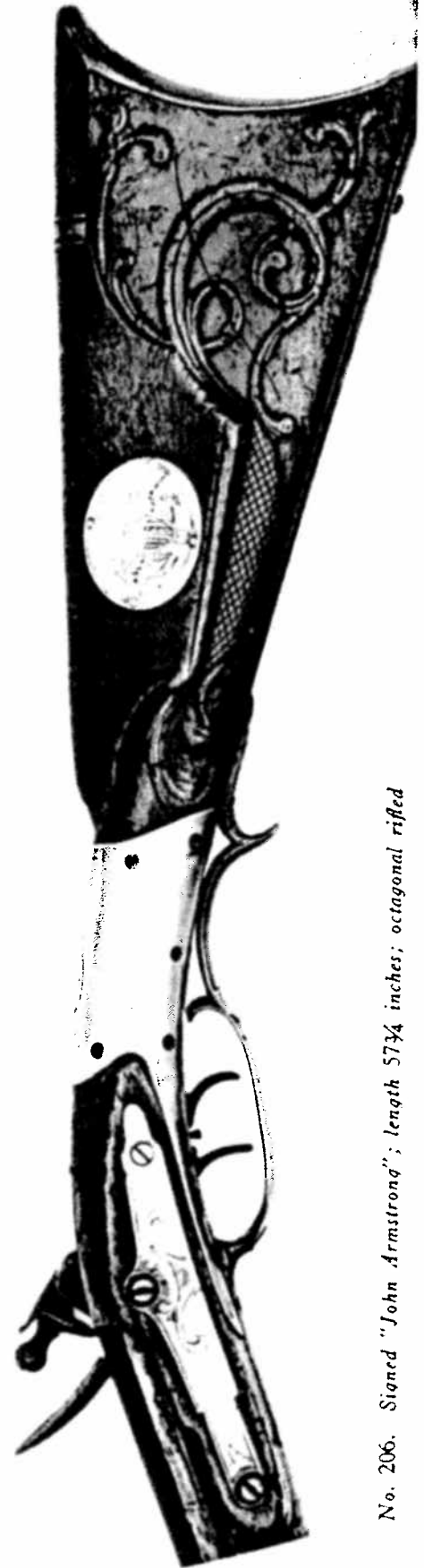
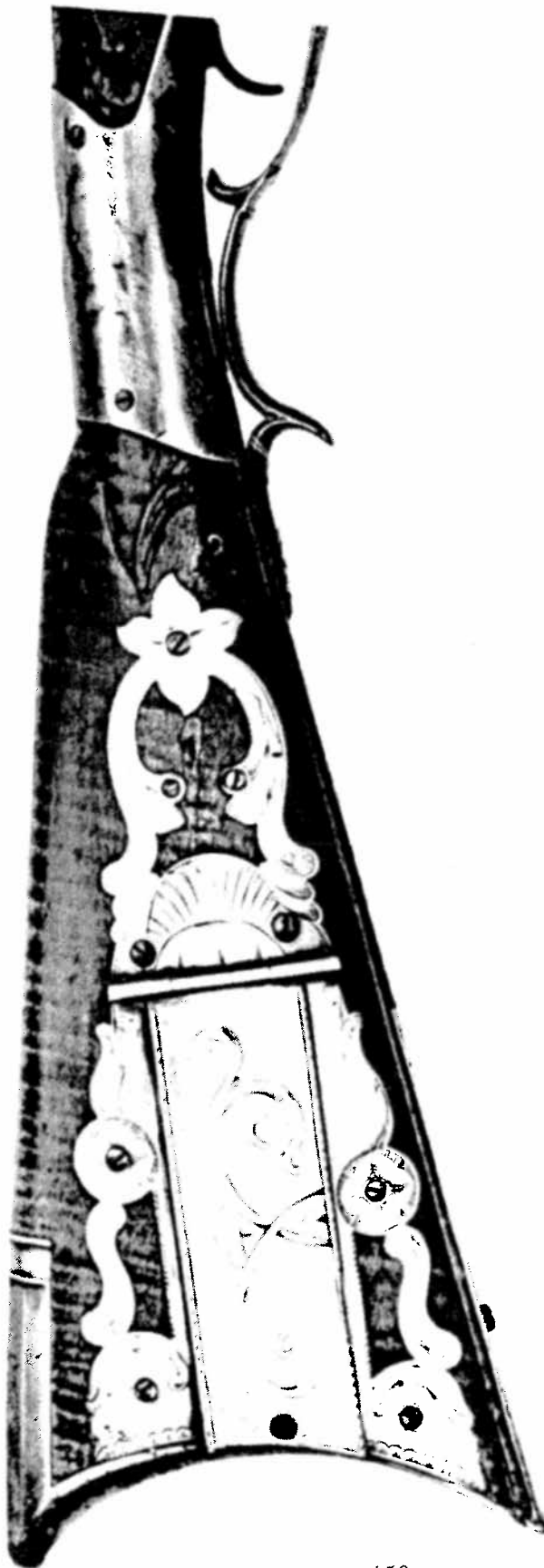
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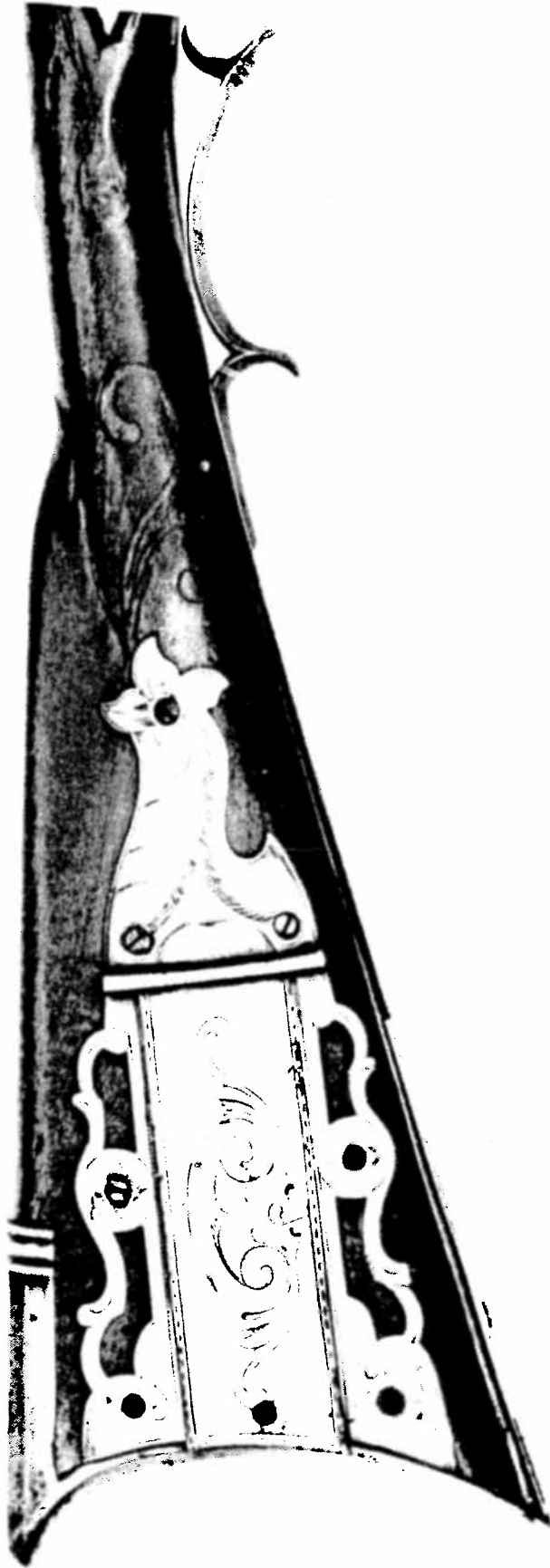
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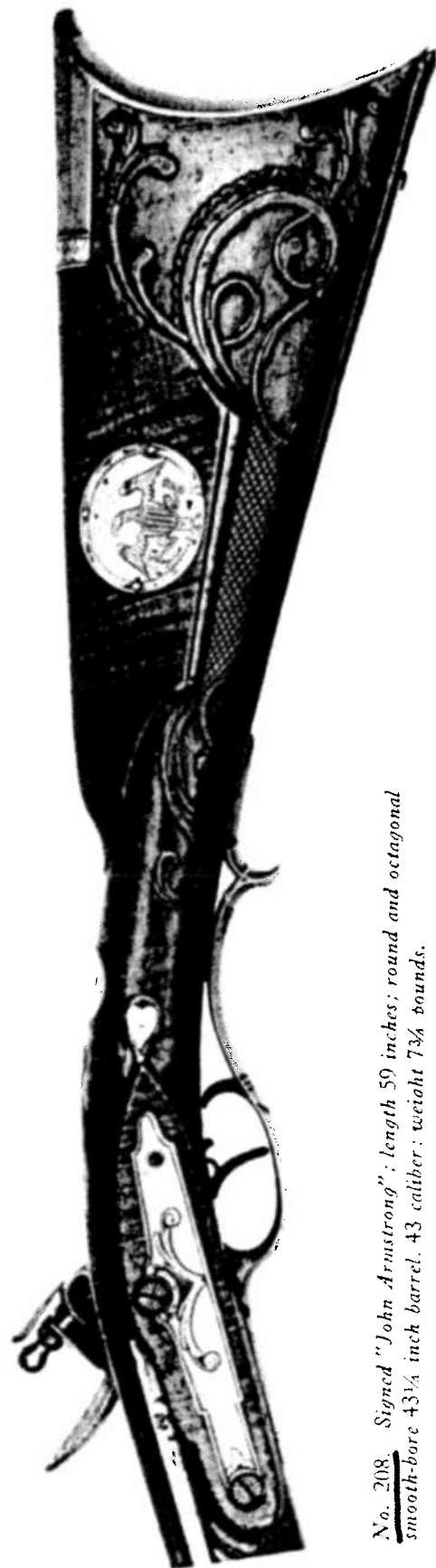
No. 205. Signed "John Armstrong"; length 59 inches; octagonal rifled 42 $\frac{3}{4}$  inch barrel, 53 caliber; weight 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds.



No. 206. Signed "John Armstrong"; length 57 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches; octagonal rifled




No. 207. Signed "John Armstrong"; length  $60\frac{3}{4}$  inches; octagonal smooth-bore  $44\frac{1}{2}$  inch barrel, 47 caliber; weight  $9\frac{3}{4}$  pounds.



No. 208. Signed "John Armstrong"; length 59 inches; round and octagonal smooth-bore  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inch barrel. 43 caliber; weight  $7\frac{3}{4}$  pounds.





# THOUGHTS ON THE KENTUCKY RIFLE IN ITS GOLDEN AGE



*All manifestation must be born through the heart*



*This book was born through the loving efforts of*

MARY ANN CRESWELL *Editor*  
SAMUEL E. DYKE *Research*  
HENRY J. KAUFFMAN *Research*  
JOHN E. GROOME *Printer*  
GEORGE N. HYATT *Publisher*  
JOE KINDIG, JR.  
BLUFORD W. MUIR *Photographer*

*These also helped:*

LEE E. BOYER, WILLIAM E. FLORENCE, RAYMOND A. FREY, HAROLD L. PETERSON  
CARL PIPPERT, CHESTER L. STAGEMYER, SABINA STEELE, WES WHITE

*It could not have been conceived but for the pioneering of*

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MARK WOODMANSEE, DR. THOMAS B. SAWYER, CHARLES D. COOK, WILLIAM JACOBS,  
CARMAN MYERS and many others.



*There is still much pleasant work to be done in this field for any who care to labor.*

*Longrifle Series*

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June 12, 1980

Dear Freddie,

I called you yesterday to make sure your address hadn't changed -- as I told your wife, I'm sending you the NKA medal won by your John Armstrong. I agree that it should remain with rifle, even though it was not part of the purchase price. And I'm sending it with no stamps attached, doing "what I feel is right" to use your words.

Now, I'd also like you to consider "what's right." You had a nice group of powder measures and other accoutrements on your table year before last. I'd like you to consider sending me something nice from that group, if you feel it's right.

The medal is coming under separate cover and will be in today's mail.

I hope it gets to you in time for the KRA meeting. And I'm sorry it's been so long. I decided to send it after some soul-searching shortly after you asked about it. But I put it in a drawer and, like ~~so~~ so many other things, I forgot it. The notice of this year's KRA meeting reminded me of it.

Looks like I won't make that meeting -- please say hello to everyone for me.

Regards,  
Al Sullivan, Jr.

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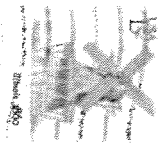
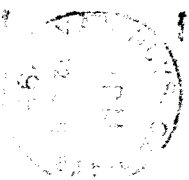


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