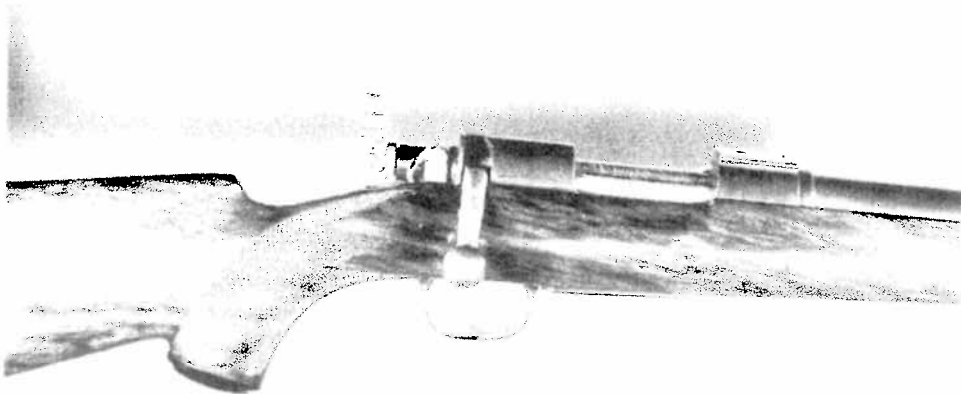


Part V: Niedner Rifle Corporation

William A. Stolley, an officer of the Heddon Bait Company, had been a customer of A.O. Niedner when Niedner was located in Malden, Massachusetts. When Stolley learned that Niedner was planning to move back to Milwaukee, Stolley offered to put up the land, building, and equipment if Niedner would relocate his business to Dowagiac, Michigan. In the beginning they called the new factory the **Niedner Rifle Barrel Company**. Although this name was used in articles in the Dowagiac local paper, I have never seen an ad using this name. After approval of the City



Mr. Niedner's Model 1924 Serial #3

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Outside of Niedner's shop at Dowagiac, Michigan

Council the shop was built, along with a 200 yard range and shooting house. Construction started in August of 1920.

Adolph Otto Niedner:

Fifteen years ago I was lucky enough to locate and interview three individuals who at one time or another had worked at Niedner's. From them I learned the day-to-day goings-on in this custom gun shop. Mr. Niedner showed up for work each and every day that the shop was open; no one can remember a day when he was not there. Niedner was well received by his new neighbors in Dowagiac and was elected mayor in 1926. For the most part Niedner would keep to himself at his work bench absorbed in and enjoying the work he did. He did all of the chambering and, as one man told me, kept the shop stunk-up with his sulfur casting while doing this. All single-shot rifle work was done by him. As late as 1940 people were still having Niedner barrels put on their single-shot Schuetzen rifles. He spent many hours designing and experimenting with new types of sights, cartridges, and rifles. Niedner, at one time or another investigated almost everything that could be done with a rifle with an eye toward improving it. He was instrumental in ushering in the age of the small caliber, Hi-speed, precision rifle, from his early work at Malden to the .22 Niedner Magnums of Dowagiac. As Niedner got older more of his work turned to what he had most enjoyed doing in his youth, shooting the muzzle-loading gun. He designed and built matchlocks, flintlocks, caplocks and even a crossbow. He joined the then new *National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association*, and *The American Single-Shot Rifle Association* shooting rifles of his own

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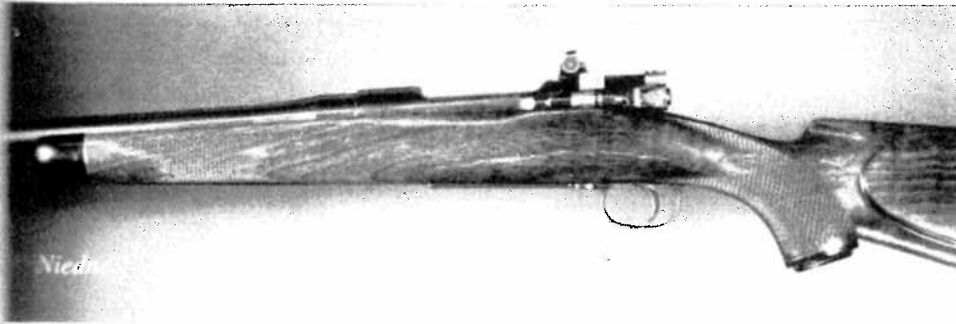
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make. Shortly after his wife's death he retired from the Niedner Rifle Corporation on September 27th, 1940. He then tore out his wife's closet to build a work bench, and there he made wooden puzzles, powder flasks, powder horns or anything that caught his fancy. This handwork was given to his many close friends. All pieces are stamped with the AON two line Dowagiac stamp. America lost one of it's greatest riflemen and gunmakers when A.O. Niedner died on December 26, 1954.

Thomas Shelhamer:

The first reference that I can find to Mr. Shelhamer is in 1921 when he wrote Townsend Whelen asking for advice on stock finish. At this time Shelhamer was making stocks for locals in Greenwood, Wisconsin. Niedner hired their first and only stockmaker in 1924, Thomas Shelhamer. Shelhamer continuing working at the Niedner Rifle Corporation until after WW II when NRC went out of business. When Shelhamer came to work at Niedner's he used his grandfather's stamp **T. SHELHAMER** to mark his work. This stamp was used in the barrel channel or under the buttplate. I'll let Mr. Shelhamer tell you about the stamp, from a letter written by him in 1967 to a friend: "At first I started stamping my name under the buttplate, using the old stamp my grandfather had used to stamp his name on his wooden carpenter tools. But as an employee of the corporation I had to do any job that came in, and a lot of these stocks differed widely from what I thought they should be. So I soon stopped this stamping practice. Since going on my own I started stamping every stock with a number, in addition to my name, so all the later ones have it. And if someone wanted a stock that did not suit me as to design, I simply turned it down." Shelhamer's style of stocking, in my words, is "Simple Elegance". Nothing about his work is anything but first class. Most people who have seen but a few of his stocks can identify his work at first glance. Before 1940 he developed a "stock signature": This is a small fillet of wood behind the pistol grip that has become know as the "Shelhamer Chinstrap". Many of his stocks have this "Chinstrap", but not all. Thomas Shelhamer's work received high

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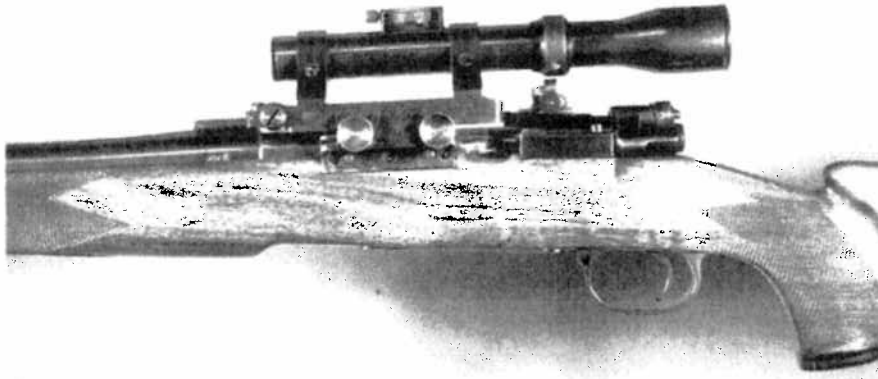
praise from the very beginning. It was not long before he held the position as one of, if not the best stockmaker in America. Turnaround time averaged eighteen months for one of his stocks. Shelhamer's name has been misspelled (Shellhammer or Shelhammer) so often that now the misspelling is common. Several years ago I saw what was surely a Shelhamer stock and in the barrel channel was "T. Shellhammer" stamped with individual stamps. Let this be a lesson: If you are going to forge his name, at least use the proper spelling. Shelhamer continued stock-making from his home in Dowagiac until his death on May 6th, 1971.

The Shop:

The Niedner shop in Dowagiac was Magnetic North on the accuracy crowd's compass. If accuracy was paramount then you had Niedner's install a barrel on your hunting, varmint or target rifle. It's hard to find an issue of *American Rifleman* from 1920-1940 where there is not some mention of Niedner's. If anyone asked Townsend Whelen about a new barrel for their rifle, he sent them to Niedner's. The more research I do on these custom makers the more Whelen involvement I find. Whelen suggested in a letter to NRC that if they would send their stocking to Griffin and Howe he, Whelen, would see to it that G&H got their barrels from Niedner. Niedner's bought their barrel steel in 1 1/4" diameter and ten foot long sections. The first step in making the barrel was to remove the mill scale and turn it down to 1 3/16". Next it went into a Pratt & Whitney



NRC Workmen 1940 left-right Vernor Gipson, Ray Langguth, Tom Shelhamer, Lewis Dodd, C. Orville Behrman, and A.O. Niedner

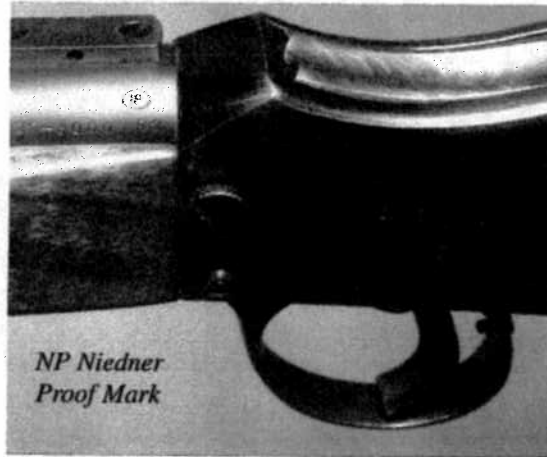
NRC Mauser .257 Roberts with Niedner Side mount

Company deep hole drilling machine, then it was rifled on a P&W sine-bar rifling machine using a hook cutter. Once the barrel had been fitted to the rifle and chambered and while it was still in the white a set of target blocks were soft-soldered to the barrel. The barrel was then tested and if all was well the blocks were removed and sights were installed. Then the barrel was blued. I tried to pin Carlyn Behrman, the man who made many of the barrels, down as to what degree of accuracy was considered acceptable. Carlyn explained to me that a rifle that left Niedner's shop had to perform the job it was meant for. If it was a target rifle it had to be able to put every shot into the X ring. If it was a varmint or hunting rifle then the customer could be assured that he could make clean kills on the game to be hunted. I have been very fortunate to have owned several rifles from the Niedner shop. I can say without reservation that if you find a Niedner rifle and the bore is good you will be pleased with how it shoots.

The rust blue that was used at Niedner's is one of the finest and longest-lasting blues I have seen on any of the early sporters. This would be a good time to mention that if you are looking at a Niedner rifle for sale, check out the condition of the bore very carefully. I have seen Niedner rifles that have been shot out but still have 100% of the blue.

The Niedner buttplate that's still in use today by custom makers was made originally by welding a cap on both ends of a length of Shelby tubing. This length of tubing was then set up between centers in a lathe and its entire length was knurled. The next step was to cut it into sections big enough for a buttplate. These sections were then hammered into a form with a lead hammer. Two holes were drilled for stock screws, then a safe file was used to smooth out a border around the edge of the plate. Once the buttplates were finished they were case hardened. If they showed color they were left alone, if not they were blued.

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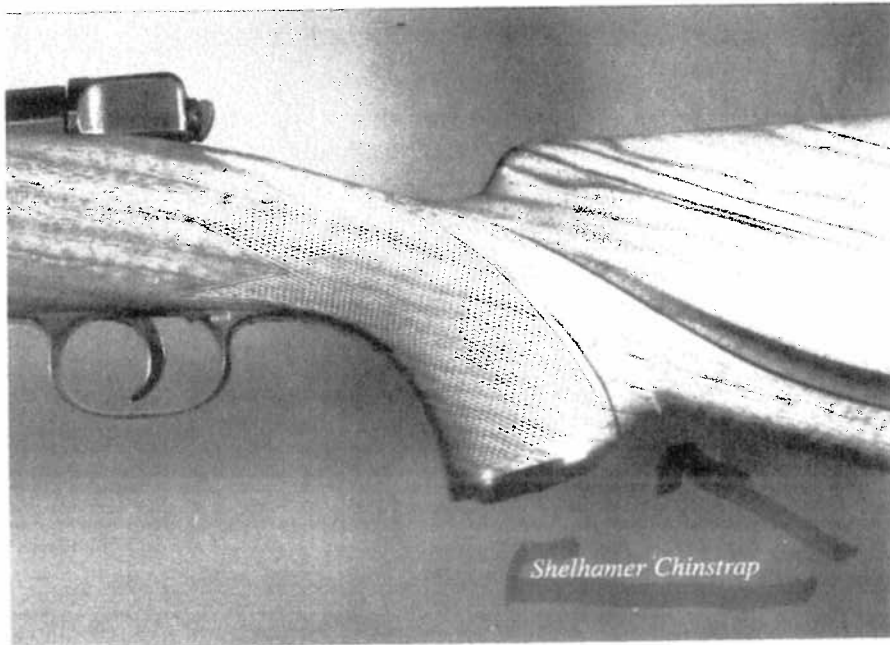
The Niedner side mount for a scope was one of the best ever constructed. It was entirely made from steel so it certainly was one of the heaviest. The first scope mounts have a blued base and are marked with the two line A.O. Niedner stamp; the later ones have a case colored base and are marked with the two line NRC stamp. I have tested these mounts by shooting a five shot group, then removing the scope from the rifle. Reinstalling it I found that the next shots all went into the same group.

In 1936 a barrel installed on your rifle was \$30, a Niedner Buttplate was \$4, the side mount was \$35, and a stock by Shelhamer was \$50. You could pick out de-luxe wood that would run up to \$40 extra. They imported their wood from Mitchell Bosly of Birmingham, England.

There were several proprietary cartridges at Niedner's. The .22 Baby Niedner was the .32-20 WCF necked down to .22 and took a special 44.5-grain Niedner bullet. This cartridge was designed by Emil Koshollek and later was introduced with modification by Winchester as the .218 Bee. The .22 Niedner Rimless and Rimmed Magnum, was the .25 Remington and the .25-35 WCF necked down to .22. using a 55-grain bullet at 3300 fps. At least one .25 Remington was necked down to 6mm. These Niedner Magnum cartridges were so popular that in 1924 a new short action rifle was designed. Plans were made to build a new factory so this rifle could be made in large numbers, Money could not be found for this new factory and only four of these short action Model 1924's (my name for them) were made. The one illustrated, Serial Number 3, was Mr. Niedner's and the caliber is 6mm Niedner Magnum. When these Niedner-Magnum cartridges were developed only the Remington Model 30 had the right size bolt face. Another cartridge from NRC shop was the .400 Niedner introduced in 1940: This utilized the .35 Newton case necked up to .40 caliber. This cartridge shot the 300 grain Winchester .411 diameter bullet used in the

.405 Winchester at 2700 fps. The .270 Magnum used the .300 Magnum case, necked down to take .270 bullets. Also built were his .25 Krag and the .25-06 that he made in Malden as well as a variation on the .257 Roberts called the .257 Niedner-Roberts.

The Depression brought hard times to Niedner's as well as other gun makers of the day. I was told that many orders were canceled and that some men who had orders already placed sent a dollar or two a week until their bill was paid. The biggest advantage NRC had was that there was no dead weight, everyone at Niedner's was a worker. The manager was the stockmaker, the secretary did the blueing and test firing, well, you get the idea. William Stolley sold his interest in NRC in 1939 to Ray Langguth and Langguth brought in Vernor Gibson and Frank Brychta as well as Bill Fox. When WW II came along NRC bid on and got the job to make front sights for the M1 Carbine. You can identify these by the letter "N" stamped on the flat just in back of the post. One worker said that the little squares of steel were delivered in a dump truck out in front of the shop. This was boring, day-in, day-out repetitive work. Their reward when the war ended was to have the contract re-negotiated which resulted in bankruptcy, and the end of the Niedner Rifle Corporation. They hung on for several years at different locations and a couple of name changes, but for the purpose of this article NRC ended with the end of the war.



Shelhamer Chinstrap

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Identifying A Niedner:

A.O. Niedner

Dowagiac, Mich.

This two line stamp was the first stamp used at Dowagiac and was used continuously from 1920-1929. After 1929 Niedner continued to use this stamp on things he made for himself. He used this stamp until his death in 1954.

Year and estimated numbers used

| | |
|------------|---------|
| 1920 | 100-125 |
| 1921 | 126-192 |
| 1922 | 193-280 |
| 1923 | 281-384 |
| 1924 | 385-480 |
| 1925 | 481-523 |
| 1926 | 524-565 |
| 1927 | 566-608 |
| 1928 | 609-650 |
| 1929 | 651-741 |

Niedner Rifle Corp.

Dowagiac, Mich.

This two line stamp was used on flat surfaces such as scope mounts.

Niedner Rifle Corporation, Dowagiac, Mich.

This roll stamp was used to mark barrels. It was applied with the barrel between centers on the lathe and used from 1930-1940.

Year and estimated numbers used

| | |
|------|-----------|
| 1930 | 745-835 |
| 1931 | 836-927 |
| 1932 | 928-1020 |
| 1933 | 1021-1113 |
| 1934 | 1114-1205 |
| 1935 | 1206-1298 |
| 1936 | 1299-1391 |
| 1937 | 1392-1474 |
| 1938 | 1475-1557 |
| 1939 | 1558-1640 |
| 1940 | 1641-1744 |

As you can see the highest A.O. Niedner number is 741 and the lowest Niedner Rifle Corporation. number is 745, so I need to find number 742, 743 and 744. Continuing his practice from Malden, Niedner marked the bottom of the barrel with the barrel number starting with number 100. I have only seen a couple of barrels with the date as well as the number from Dowagiac. It was a practice in Dowagiac that the man doing the rifling would also put his name or initial next to the barrel number such as **1348 CB**. **CB** was Carlyn W. Behrman, a very skilled worker who made barrels from 1933 To 1939. Other identification marks seen are **OB** for Orville Behrman and **E. R. Stahl** for Elmer Stahl. Every barrel number was entered into a ledger that Mr. Niedner kept. Where this ledger is today I have no idea. Do you?

In 1939 Thomas Shelhamer was test firing a 1917 Enfield out the window, holding it just in front of the receiver with his left hand. Upon firing, the barrel burst and caused enough damage to Shelhamer's hand that for some time it was not known if he would ever do stock work again. After this incident a wood and metal box was built and all guns were proof tested with a 10% overload. The proof mark was applied to the barrel just in front of the receiver. The earliest number gun recorded so far with the Niedner proof is number 1681.

You don't often find a rifle from the Niedner Rifle Corporation, even when stocked by Shelhamer, that has many bells and whistles. Very few have the original action markings removed, checkered bolt knobs, engraving, or other visual enhancements. If your rifle said Niedner on the barrel and Shelhamer on the stock — well, that said it all.