

Percussion Double Rifles of North America

– Different Designs and Origins

Part I

by Dick Hummel

The double rifle today evokes images of British and German products. That image has been accurate for the past century. Before the cartridge era in America, commencing about 1870, percussion sporting rifles were often of the double rifle variety. Two barrels, two shots, extra costs, an upscale customer base—all are defining features of this form of sporting arm.

In my collecting career I have gathered nine examples of percussion double rifles crafted in North America (two in Canada, seven in America) They vary from almost “best” quality to a utilitarian quality level. Seven remain in my possession. Let’s start with listing the nine. **Side by side**, unmarked, perhaps by John Grainger of Toronto; **Side by side**, David Hudson, Napoleon, Ohio; **Side by side**, Wells & Hale, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; **Side by side**, unmarked, relatively crude compared to the other three side by sides; **Over-Under-swivel breech**, Soper, Ontario; **Over-Under-swivel breech**, Claudius H. Beach, Marshall, Michigan; **Side by side**, Benjamin Mills, Harrodsburg, Kentucky; **Over-Under - Wurfflein**, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; **Over-Under - W. & C. Ogden-Owego**, New York.

An initial point drawn from the list is the widespread origin of these arms. They seem to have been crafted everywhere! Only two of my examples came from the same place, and that is Canada!

First, let’s explore my claim that double rifles were extra-cost items that required deeper pockets than an average hunter would have. References such as Gardiner contained historic census records of small gun-making enterprises. Gardiner most often cites the censuses of 1850 and 1870. The typical gun-maker of 1850, 1870 employed one or two hands that were paid from \$25 to \$35 per month, around a dollar a day, most likely. The arms produced in this period seemed to sell for, roughly \$20, depending on ornamentation. An 1870 gun maker in South Bend, Indiana, reported making a combination rifle-shotgun, which he valued at roughly three times the price of a single-barreled rifle. (Gardner, 34) The increased cost is not hard to explain: more materials (two locks and two barrels) and more required skills to join the barrels, inlet the barrels and locks to the stock, and tune the locks to work equally well with the set trigger. If we dare extrapolate from this datum, then combination guns (double rifles, rifle/shotguns, etc.) were high-ticket items for makers of the period, suggesting that only the better-heeled sportsmen could afford them.

At a slightly later date, however, the prices of double rifles converged with single barreled rifles. Examine this following price list from J.H. Johnston – Great Western Gun Works – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This company was founded in 1866 by James H. Johnson and remained in business in various forms until 1923. (Rosenberg and Kaufman, 74) As of 1874, the company employed 25 men in the manufacturing of its extensive line of muzzleloading arms. (Rosenberg and Kaufman, 74) In 1879 the company’s offerings included the following list of muzzleloading rifles and shotguns:

- Plain rifles \$8.25-\$9.50
- Our new No.5 Rifle \$11.50-\$12.00
- Extra fine Rifles \$15.50-\$26.00
- Horseback Rifles \$10.00-\$11.50
- Double Barrel Rifles \$10.00-\$11.50
- Double Rifle and Shotgun \$22.00-\$35.00
- Great Western Rifle and Shotgun \$40.00
- Single Barrel Shot Gun \$2.00-\$10.50
- Double Barrel Shot Guns \$.50-\$9.00
- Medium Quality Fine Twist Double Gun \$10.50-\$20.00
- Great Western Double Barrel Duck Gun \$11.00
- Fine laminated steel Double Guns \$22.00-\$27.00
- Extra Fine Laminate Steel Double Barrel Shot Guns \$30.00-\$54.00
- Turkey, Goose, and Deer Guns \$38.00-\$55.00

(quoted in Kauffman, 244)

Why were double rifles so close in price to the single-barrel, plain rifles while the double rifle/shotgun remained two to three times the price? Perhaps the double rifles were being imported from a lower-cost source that could not be matched with American labor. This is a topic worth pursuing. I hereby add it to my *bucket list*.

Another aside, perhaps, concerns the ending of the muzzleloading era and resistance to that demise. As late as 1883 the company catalogue of James Bown and Sons was still vigorously endorsing the muzzleloading rifle in general and their products in particular:

The muzzleloading rifle for accurate shooting from 50 to 300 yards is fully equal to any breech loading rifle made, and for small game is far superior, because you can get them made with such a size ball as is best adapted to the game in the part of the country which you chance to live. In many places there is no large game – hence a breech loading rifle, either 38-100, 44-100, or 50-100



My double rifle (unmarked) is identical to one Dick Binger owned ten years ago

caliber, would be of no use, because the ball being so large that small game hit with such a size ball as the two latter sizes would be entirely destroyed and not fit to use. Then again, the expense in ammunition is not one-fourth for a Muzzle-Loading Rifle, for what it is for a Breech Loading Rifle, and in the country the item of ammunition is looked upon in a business way especially when in some parts it is very difficult to get cartridges for Breech Loaders. But you can also get powder, lead and caps in the most remote parts of the world, and this is why we claim the Muzzle-Loader is better for the money than the Breech-Loader, and especially when you can get such accurate shooters as are made by us. (quoted in Kauffman, 220)

Now, on to the rifles themselves. Let's start with the most elegant of the North American percussion double rifles in my collection, the gem attributed to John Grainger, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

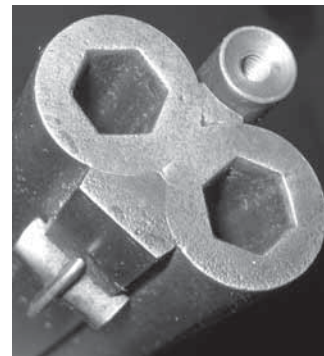
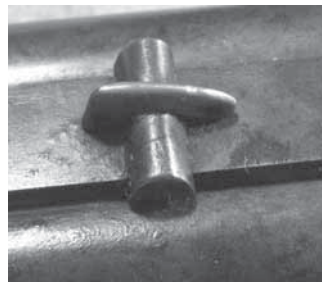
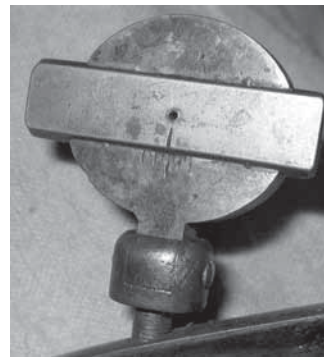
My double rifle (unmarked) is identical to one Dick Binger owned ten years ago. That one was marked [John] Grainger-Toronto. This name in Stockel is listed as working in Toronto 1854-1868. Binger claims Grainger then went to S. Africa to work and finally back to England. Grainger is reputed to have made/used locks equal to the Brazier quality from Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, England. If you have ever operated (cocked) a Brazier lock, you know there is no equal to the feel and sound of the movement of the hammer. According to Gardner (p. 266) a James Grainger worked in Wolverhampton as a clockmaker and exhibited his locks at the London International Exhibition in 1851 and 1862 - perhaps a brother or other relation to the John Grainger to whom the crafting of this rifle is attributed.

The double set triggers are designed to fire each barrel as selected. So both hammers could not be cocked and only one



Unmarked double rifle

chosen to fire. This feature and the tang sight suggest a more deliberate sighting approach, rather than having two barrels ready for a rapid left and right volley. The walnut stock has the

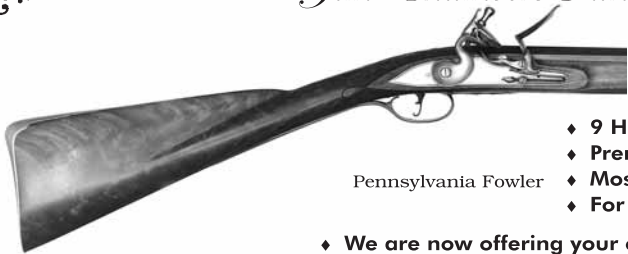


refined lines of a British *best* double rifle of the percussion era. The wrist and fore end are finely checkered.

The fold-down tang sight seems an American touch, to my eye. Also, the cap box displays an American style. Another American touch is the absence of any engraving.

The hexagonal bore is the defining feature of guns built by

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John Grainger. Where the tubes originated is a fascinating and unanswered question at this point.

How to measure the bore dimension is a puzzle – from corner to corner, or flat to flat? The bore is .36" from flat to flat and .39" from corner to corner. Most likely Grainger provided molds for hexagonal bullets or marketed a line of proprietary bullets that he manufactured. So, a Canadian-built rifle, with perhaps an American-added tang sight, produced for Canadian, Northern U.S. big game hunting? The rifle was purchased from a dealer from New England who perhaps encountered it because of his proximity to Canada. Plausible? Possible.

W. H. Soper-London, Ontario

While we are visiting Canada, consider my second example of a North American double rifle. This one is a swivel-breech over/

under rifle by Soper of London, Ontario. The Soper name appears in Stockel several times. There are a Philo Soper of London, Ontario, active 1850-1868, a John W. Soper with the date 1886 listed, and a W. H. Soper active as of 1858. My rifle is marked with W.H. Soper's name on both barrels and the lock plate.

Dick Binger claimed that Soper, along with Grainger, used hexagonal bores on his rifle tubes. My specimen appears to be of that design, the muzzles showing considerable wear compared to the muzzles of the Grainger double rifle. But inspection of this photograph seems to reveal grooves at the corners of the hexagon. Also, there is something very curious about the bores. The appearance suggests to me that the tubes might be liners!

Wow, if so, then there is the possibility that Soper could use one size of barrels reamed to accept liners and install the



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caliber, twist, and perhaps hexagonal bores to the customers' specifications. Interesting possibility!

The rifle weighs about nine pounds, with 32" barrels of .45 caliber (when measured from flat to flat, .465 corner to corner.). The barrels rotate on a spindle through the breech and are unlocked for rotation by a push button on the top tang.

The stock is of highly figured walnut and the stock hardware, trigger guard, butt plate, and toe plate are iron embellished with excellent scroll engraving.



The lock plate, hammer, and top tang are also engraved with the same pattern. The

cap box is German silver, with an eagle motif and no engraving. The engraving suggests an upgrade for a customer with deeper pockets or one not bound by American taste for simplicity and functionality rather than needless decorations. (Oh, to be able to read the mind of the person who ordered this double rifle!)

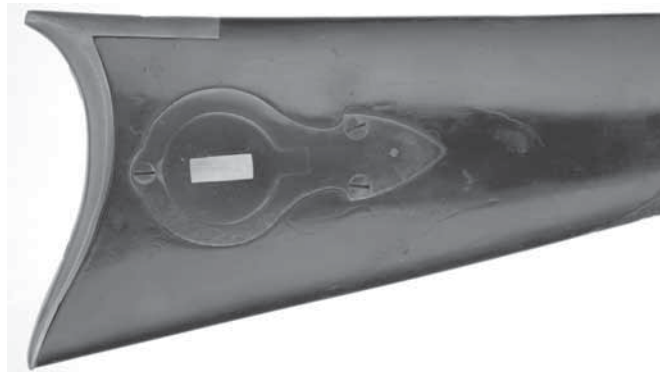
A folk-art silver deer inlay appears on the cheek piece.

Both represent conventional American decorative themes.

Benjamin Mills, Harrodsburg, Kentucky

I hesitate to include this rifle because it is a *ghost* in my collection. It once was with me; now it's gone to another collector whose name and location I do not know. I transferred the rifle through an intermediary and intentionally did not ask for details. If he reads this, I hope he appreciates what was entrusted into his custody.

The ghost rifle is a percussion side-by-side rifle in .52 caliber. It weighs about nine pounds; I have no photograph of its muzzles. Its iron hardware is finished very dark, suggesting to me it was a dedicated *plains* rifle, but not very plain when we take a closer look. The locks were reported to be by Brazier of



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Benjamin Mills, Harrodsburg, Kentucky

Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, England, the most famous lock maker in the 19th century. They certainly felt like the best possible when cocked. The double set triggers worked like our John Grainger specimen. The iron cap box wears a neat rectangular gold inscription plate that was never engraved.

The maker, Benjamin Mills, of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, was a highly respected creator of American *best* sporting arms in the antebellum period in Kentucky. His shop was located in Harrodsburg, a 19th-century resort area for the Kentucky gentry. Kit Carson is reported to have visited Mills' shop and purchased a double rifle for a western journey he commenced after his stop. (I once fantasized that this might have been Carson's purchase! Aren't we silly?)

Benjamin Mills's work has been vigorously investigated and surviving examples of his output reside in prominent collections in Kentucky. He was a subject of an extensive article in the journal of the American Society of Arms Collectors a number of years past. One reason that I treasured my time as custodian of this rifle is that it was considered the only known

example of a side-by-side Mills rifle. A number of over/under examples are extant.

The "saw handle" profile of a Mills stock behind the barrel is almost unique in American rifle stock architecture.

To be continued next month...

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