

An old rifle's story

I am an old muzzle loading rifle. The workmanship in me is fine even if I do say so myself. I hang on the wall with other rifles made long ago by small village gunsmiths just like the one who made me. I was not intended to be a decoration. Through all of my early years I was carried into some forests where man's foot had never stepped, then along lakes which yet had not names. At that time not only deer and bear were in this ancient woodland but moose and panthers roamed the valleys and mountains. In the hands of several hunters through the years I did my share to help furnish food for the tables of areas families, protect livestock from predators and even to show myself at rifle matches.

My history has borne me from the mid 19th century through the 20th and on into the 21st. I was made by a small gunsmith named Wyllys Avery in his shop at Salisbury, NY. That village is in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains and at the very gateway to vast forest areas. My maker did put his name on me but just Avery. I know that there were more ornate rifles made in the shop but I was meant to be a useful tool of everyday life. Mr. Avery was a surveyer but an old rifle did not really know what that was. In addition to fine rifles like me, he also made surveyer's compasses.

Before my niche in time the more ancient flintlock form of ignition was all there was. I was something new. The spark that ignited the powder charge that was to propel my round projectile was produced by small pills about the size of mustard seeds. These pills were made from mercury fulminate. My original pill lock mechanism surprisingly yet remains intact. I could easily have been changed to the more modern percussion system only a few years after I was made. Possibly my owner was opposed to change or just too elderly to use me much anymore.

In 1850, only 20 years or so after I was made, my maker got his name in a book called "Trappers of New York" by Mohawk Valley author J.R. Simms. Avery had made two special guns for Nat Foster and Nick Stoner, two noted are hunter-trappers. We will let author Simms state the details in his own words:

"Foster and Stoner had each a rifle at one time made after the same pattern by Wyllys Avery of Salsbury and called "double shooters". They were made with a single barrel with two locks, one placed above the other far enough to admit the two charges and have the upper charge of powder rest upon the lower bullet. The locks were made for percussion pills and when the pick which crushed the pill at the first lock was down there was no danger to be apprehended in firing the lower charge."

I'm glad that I was not altered. People pay special attention to me and I really like that. For many years I belonged to the Burkdorf family who lived not so far from where I was made. Someone has said I cost about \$75 which was a lot of money in the 1830s. Years later an elderly man from that family gave me to a farmer neighbor. I sat in a dark closet until a collector named Skip bought me. He had been interested in Avery since he was a young boy. My picture and the story of my maker has even been in a book. That made me really proud.

I cannot tell you much more about me except that I know I have been cherished through the years and I hope I will survive and be taken care of far into the future.

Skip Barshied
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