

NEARLY 60 YEARS of gunmaking are represented in Carl Hanneken's first and latest muzzle loaders. He hand carved and filed the pistol at age nine. The York rifle in the center is one of his more recent creations. Below are the chunks of iron and maple that he will form into a Hawken rifle.

Black Powder, White Smoke

Muzzle Loaders Are Way Of Life For This Champion Gunsmith

BY ERIC CARLSON

You would think that anyone who'd fired as many bullets as Carl Hanneken—and had as many fired back—might be tired of guns.

As a World War II machine gunner on a B-17, Hanneken flew 150 missions over Nazi Germany. He once bailed out when his plane was shot down behind enemy lines. He caught a bullet in the leg while eluding capture for three months before returning to England for more missions.

Hanneken's legs still carry shards of shrapnel from an anti-aircraft shell that burst just below his seat. Even now, he can't walk through an airport metal detector without setting off the alarm.

Yet to this day, nothing stirs the soul of this industrious Shallotte retiree like the smell of gunpowder.

Black powder, that is. Ignited by a chunk of flint striking a piece of metal and exploding in a fiery flash and a cloud of smoke, propelling a homemade bullet down the barrel of a homemade rifle and squarely through the bulls-eye of a target 50 yards away.

Antique firearms are more than just a hobby for Hanneken. They are his life's passion. He's made more than 250 muzzle-loading rifles and 50 pistols and has restored more than 75 original weapons. He is the 1989 North Carolina Muzzle Loading Rifle Champion. And two weeks ago in Charleston he won the 1993 South Carolina Championship.

Taking top honors at both Carolina matches was a goal Hanneken set for himself after he and his wife Gloria moved to Brunswick County 10 years ago. Shooting muzzle loaders had always been a favorite pastime back in Dayton, Ohio, where he learned to make his own guns and often competed against national champions.

"This is my form of relaxation, my therapy," said Hanneken as he poured a measure of black powder down the octagonal iron barrel of a .50-caliber flintlock. It's one he built from his drawings of a rifle made in York, Pa., around 1700.

"I used to come out to the range all tensed up from a long day of work and I'd be about to go bonkers," he said. "After a few hours of this, my hostilities are all gone and I'm cool. I can face the world."

With the rapid, relaxed precision of a half-century's

experience, Hanneken places a strip of cloth across the muzzle and lays a shiny lead ball in the divot. He taps it just below the surface and deftly slices away the excess "patch" before ramming the load down the barrel.

Stepping to the firing line, he pours a few grains of powder from a deer's antler into the priming chamber, then closes it and cocks the flint-mounted hammer. Raising the rifle stock to his cheek, he pauses momentarily.

There is a bright flash, a satisfying "KA-BOOM" and a puff of white smoke as a neat round hole appears in the black paper circle down range.

"It's a great diversion. Almost a meditation," Hanneken said as he rammed a cleaning patch down the barrel. "To shoot competitively, you have to wash your mind free of everything and concentrate on nothing else but what you're doing."

"It's good for you," he said. "I don't know of anyone who ever went bad shooting guns in competition."

Hanneken has been around guns for as long as he can remember. Raised on a farm, he remembers shooting as "a way of life" and hunting season as a time when "the delicacies of winter"—venison, pheasant, quail, rabbit, duck—graced the family dinner table.

As a youngster, he started hanging around the nearby workshop of Sam Tobias, a world renowned gunsmith who put the boy to work refurbishing antique firearms. At the age of nine, Hanneken retrieved an old barrel and some discarded wood and metal from Tobias's scrap pile.

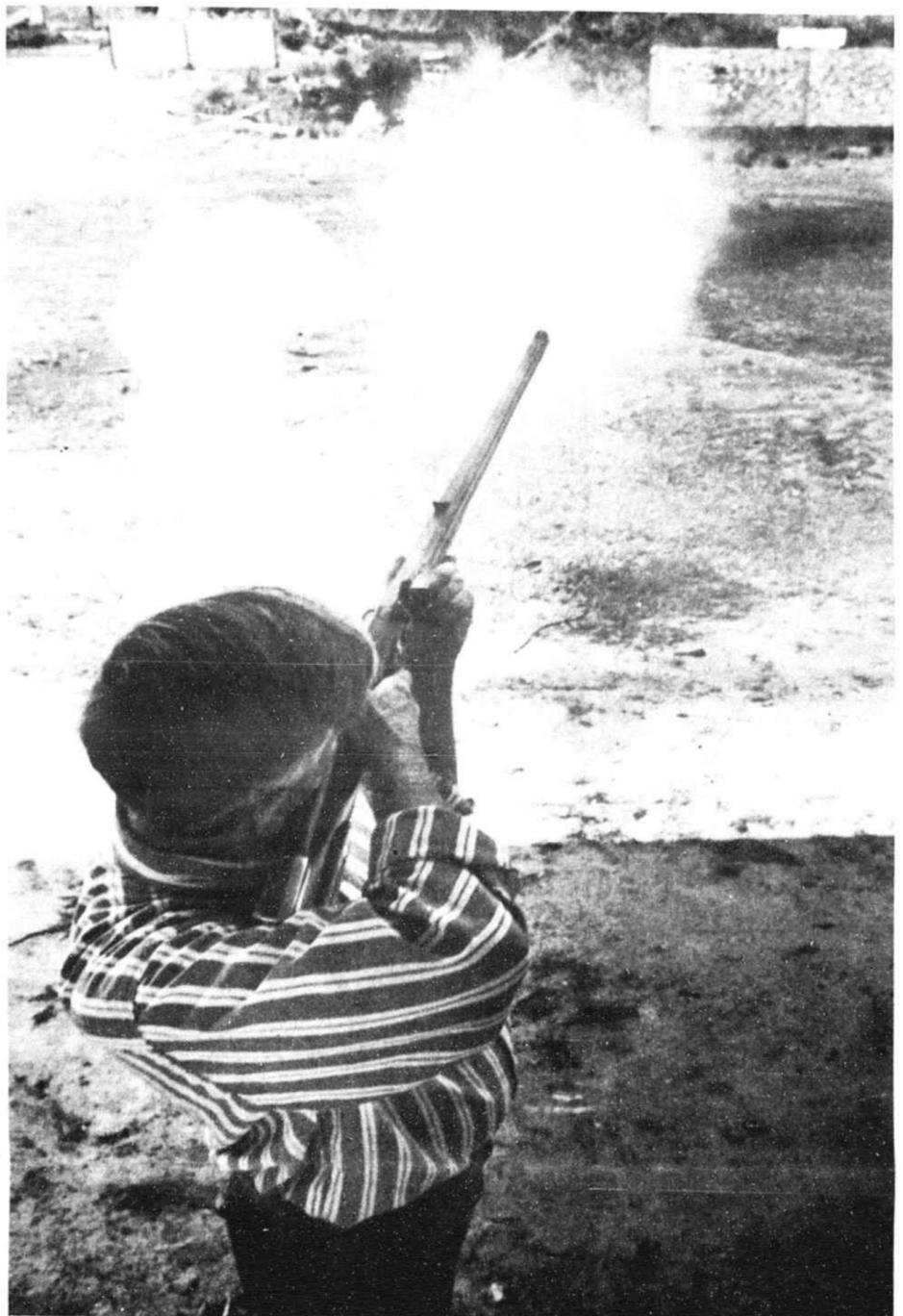
Using nothing but a metal file and some woodworking tools, he fashioned a small flintlock pistol that became the first of many muzzle loaders in his impressive collection of antique originals and reproductions.

Hanneken has built, restored and repaired muzzle loading firearms for customers from across the country. He realized another goal when he made the rifle used by the winner of the United States Muzzle Loading Rifle Championship.

Each rifle he makes is custom-fit to the shooter's body and takes between six months and a year to complete. His hand-carved stocks are often intricately inlaid with sterling silver. At a selling price of between \$600 and \$1,000, Hanneken figures he makes about "10 cents

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STAFF PHOTOS BY ERIC CARLSON

WITH A PUFF OF SMOKE and a loud retort, champion marksman Carl Hanneken of Shallotte unleashes another .50-caliber ball from his homemade reproduction of a 1700 flintlock rifle.

an hour" at his craft. But that's not why he builds guns.

"I do it for the love of it," he said. "If I set a dollar value on my time, you couldn't afford it and I wouldn't do it."

While he might consider making you a muzzle loader, Hanneken suggests that beginners start out with a manufactured gun. A good one can be had for about \$130.

"Then all you need are powder, patching and bullets," he said. "You can shoot for a month for what it would cost to buy a single box of modern ammo."

When Hanneken makes a gun for himself, it's usually an exercise in historical engineering. He likes to figure out how the old firearms worked and how early gunsmiths went about building them with the tools of the day. These projects often take him to museums, where he makes sketches of the original weapons, and to libraries, where he reads about the men who designed them.

His research has given Hanneken a wealth of information about the development of firearms. He notes that the "minie ball" used in Civil War muskets was not named for its size—which is quite large—but for its inventor, French Army Capt. Claude Minie.

Most people assume that what we now call bullets—with a brass shell, a primer, gunpowder and a slug in one package—were not invented until after the Civil War. But Hanneken notes that they were not used in that conflict because the warring governments refused to pay the Smith and Wesson company for the patent rights. He can even show you a six-shot, cartridge-loaded revolver with the date 1859 engraved on the cylinder.

He also points out—with unabashed pride—that to this day, the record for a group of five shots fired from 1,000 yards is still held by a muzzle-loading rifle.

Hanneken was studying to be a tool maker when America entered World War II. At age 17, he went overseas with the 8th Air Force. After a stint in North Africa, he was transferred to England, where he rode in the belly turret of a B-17, firing .50-caliber machine guns at at-

tacking German fighter planes. He was credited with shooting down two Messerschmidt 109s and helping to bring down a third.

One day his squadron was sent to bomb the submarine pens at Bremen. The group encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire and Hanneken's plane took a fatal hit. Hanneken could not remain in his turret for the crash landing and was ordered to bail out with the tail gunner. It would be seven months before they returned to England.

"The only reason I'm alive today is because of my Boy Scout training," said Hanneken, who had earned his Eagle rank and would later become a respected scoutmaster. "Everything I learned came in handy and helped us survive."

The two men spent the next three months behind enemy lines, hiding from the Germans and making their way on foot across hundreds of miles of hostile territory.

Out in the countryside, Hanneken, the Ohio farm boy, showed his partner how to burrow into haystacks at night for warmth and how to uproot frozen turnips and thaw them out for food. When they passed through a town, the Brooklyn-born tail gunner took the lead, showing Hanneken how to survive in an urban environment.

"We found a place to hide and he took off," Hanneken remembered. "A half-hour later he came back with bread, meat and fresh clothes."

Eventually they reached the Rhine River and were taken in by one of Gen. George Patton's armored divisions, but not before Hanneken was shot in the calf by an unseen enemy. Although he was decorated with the Purple Heart, the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross, Hanneken remains modest about his wartime exploits.

"All of those medals and a dollar will get you a drink in any bar," he said, priming the pan for another shot.

"KA-BOOM!" goes the flintlock as another neat round hole appears in the black paper circle.

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