



People today are fascinated with many of the common tools used by settlers in the American West. This fascination is most evident with the firearms used by people who served in the military, explored the West, or journeyed to the rugged mountains in search of beaver and other fur-bearing animals. One of the most famous firearms of all time was the legendary Hawken Rifle. A myth has grown up around the Hawken, which infers that every fur trapper and trader carried this particular brand of firearm into the Rockies, and felt that any other type of rifle was second-rate. It is fitting that the Museum of Westward Expansion should display a Hawken rifle, since these firearms were manufactured in St. Louis; but the Hawken rifle is not displayed to give the impression that it was the only weapon of the mountainman era.

When Jacob Hawken arrived in St. Louis in 1818, the town was still a tiny fur trading outpost on the edge of the wilderness. St. Louis was just starting to be known as the logical supply point for people headed west, due to its excellent location along natural overland and water routes. Hawken came to St. Louis from Harpers Ferry, Virginia (today's West Virginia), where he, his father and brothers were gunsmiths in the federal armory. It is probable that Jacob learned his gun-making skills during his years in the armory, skills he brought to St. Louis in 1818. A commercial hub such as St. Louis provided Hawken with the supplies he needed to repair and manufacture firearms. Hawken befriended James Lakenan, another local gunsmith, who, according to local records, operated a shop at the corner of Hickory and First Streets — about one block west of the Mississippi River levee. During the early years of Hawken's St. Louis trade, he made rifles with the flintlock ignition system, later converting to the new percussion system in the 1830s. Hawken manufactured a larger caliber weapon, different from the popular "Pennsylvania" or "Kentucky" rifle. These rifles were not powerful enough to kill large western game such as grizzly bears, bison and moose, whereas the Hawken fired a larger ball.

Unfortunately, only one known example of a Hawken flintlock rifle has survived. This was made by Jacob's younger brother Samuel, who operated a gunsmith shop in Hagerstown, Maryland, and later moved to Xenia, Ohio. This full-stock Hawken flintlock is believed to be a pre-1825 model. It bears the trademark "S. Hawken" on the barrel, and is currently in a private collection. The lack of early Hawken rifle specimens

presents a problem because there are so few to examine and study; it also raises questions about how many were originally manufactured. If, as legend says, nearly every mountain man carried a Hawken rifle, and fur companies bought quantities of them for their employees, where have they all disappeared to?

In 1822, the American fur trade began anew with William Ashley and Andrew Henry. They devised a profitable way to obtain furs, using “contract trappers” who in effect, never left the mountains. Each year a caravan of supplies wended its way along the Platte River Road to a mountain rendezvous. Coincidentally, 1822 was also the year in which Samuel Hawken joined his brother Jacob in St. Louis. People once theorized that the Hawken gunshop was so deluged with orders from the new fur trade that Jacob needed his brother’s assistance in filling them all. There is no proof for this assumption. It is known that Jacob and Samuel’s father died in 1821, that Samuel left Xenia for Hagerstown to provide assistance to the family, and that in 1822 Samuel’s wife died. Samuel told a newspaper correspondent in 1882:

“On June 2, 1822, I arrived in St. Louis. My first shop was on the Levee, near Cherry Street but there were mighty few houses along there then. How many? Well, I reckon not over half a dozen, and that was the heart of the town in those times. I didn’t stop at the first place long, for I soon had a new shop on the Levee, near where Olive Street is...”

It wasn’t until 1825 that Samuel and Jacob Hawken decided to go into business together and manufacture the rifles with the legendary “J & S Hawken” on the barrel. The brothers, along with a small staff, made their rifles, shotguns, and pistols in their store on Laurel Street. The location is now occupied by the western abutment of the Eads Bridge, built in 1874 along what is now called Washington Street. Between 1825 and 1849, when Jacob died at age 63, the brothers designed a plains rifle of .54 caliber with a heavy octagonal barrel, low sights, double triggers, a ramrod carried under a metal rib, a sturdy butt stock, and a crescent-shaped butt plate. The total weight of the firearm was 10 to 12 pounds. This plains-style rifle became popular due to its sturdiness and dependability in the field, important attributes for frontiersmen without access to repair shops.

Records of the business do not seem to confirm the Hawken legend of a rifle in the hands of every mountainman. For instance, an 1850 manufacturing census reveals that Samuel Hawken had \$1,000 invested in his business. During 1850, he used 2,000 feet of lumber, a ton of iron, 520 pounds of steel, 2,200 pounds of charcoal and 50 pounds of brass, costing a total of \$500. He had four assistants, with a total monthly payroll of \$120. The year’s production of 100 hand-made rifles and 20 shotguns was worth a total of \$2,700. The output of Hawken rifles was obviously not large enough to supply the thousands of mountainmen, overlanders, and gold miners going west by 1850, but there were many competitors in the firearms business in St. Louis. For example, a shop operated by T. Albright produced 300 firearms in 1850 worth \$8,000; these weapons were prized by Navajo Indians, who traded for them with Mormons in Salt Lake City.

In addition to his business activities, Samuel Hawken was an important part of the St. Louis community. He served as a city alderman in 1828. He was a dedicated volunteer fireman with the Union Fire Company, which named an engine they purchased in 1845 the “Sam Hawken” in his honor. Hawken continued in the gunsmith trade until his retirement in 1854. For a short time afterward, his son William ran the business, but the panic of 1857 forced the shop to close. In 1858 both Samuel and William moved to Denver, Colorado, where they found employment in several gunsmith shops. By 1861, Samuel Hawken sold his St. Louis business to one of his employees, John P. Gemmer, who changed the name of the shop to the “Hawken Rifle Factory” in the 1870s. Gemmer continued to manufacture the Hawken-style rifle until 1915, eventually changing the name on the barrel from “Hawken” to “J. Gemmer.”

The Hawken rifle in the Museum of Westward Expansion was made in St. Louis sometime after 1861. It is a .54 caliber weapon with a maple wood half-stock. The barrel was shortened a few inches by one of its owners from its original length of 34 inches. Specimens of Hawken rifles dating to this later period have survived; many are on display in museums such as the Missouri Historical Society, while others are in the hands of private collectors. The design remains popular among collectors, and reproduction Hawken rifles are sold today by a variety of manufacturers.

Although many well-known western figures, such as Jim Bridger, Buffalo Bill, James Clyman, Kit Carson, Mariano Modena, Porter Rockwell and John C. Frémont owned Hawken rifles, the Hawken was a weapon which came to be prized only after the era of the mountainman ended. Its fame rests with its use by scouts, leaders of emigrant wagon trains, explorers, and gold miners, but not by mountainmen. During the height of the fur trade, other rifles such as the Lancaster rifle, the English pattern rifle by Henry & Brandt, and personal rifles by Pennsylvania & Southern style were far more popular and numerous than the Hawken. (The LDS church museum in Salt Lake City has a wonderful full stock percussion Hawken rifle that was owned by Joseph Smith.)

The mountainman period represents a fascinating part of our country’s history, filled with interesting stories of hardship and adventure. But like many tall tales from the mountainman era, the legend of Jacob and Samuel Hawken has grown out of all proportion to their true role as gunsmiths. In reality, the Hawken produced small quantities of well-made, reliable firearms, with their greatest period of production during the overlander/gold rush era of the 1840s and 50s, rather than the earlier mountainman era.

The rifle pictured at the top of this article is a custom made Hawken style rifle made by J. F. Saunders around 1970. It is a .54 cal rifle featuring a Douglas Barrel. It weighs approximately 9 pounds. It is a very accurate reproduction of an 1830’s J & S Hawken. It is also a very accurate shooting rifle!