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## Across the Woods with Kentucky's "Humble" Gunsmiths

by Mel Hankla

The Transylvania region of frontier Virginia was long rumored to be a mythical promised land. Exciting stories spurring the imagination were reported by such men as Dr. Thomas Walker, who in 1750 explored the Kentucky territory from the south passing through the Cumberland Gap, all the while Christopher Gist, as an agent for the Ohio Company was exploring the northern boundaries along the Ohio River. By 1770 the "longhunters" were spinning tall-tales of majestic land to be claimed and unlimited game for the taking. In 1774, James Harrod constructed the first permanent settlement in Kentucky (Fort Harrod) and the following year Benjamin Logan settled St. Asaph's, later to be called the "Standing Fort". In March of 1775, North Carolinian Richard Henderson illegally bargained with the Indians for land between the Ohio and Cumberland rivers for his Transylvania (means "across the woods")

Land Company. He, then hired Daniel Boone to blaze the famous Wilderness Trail and build a stockade on the Kentucky River near present day Winchester. Unknown to Boone, Henderson intended this settlement to be the capital of the new Transylvania. Nonetheless, by 1777, Kentucky became known as the "dark and bloody ground" and any pioneer heading toward this land of dreams would not consider such a journey without a dependable rifled gun in hand.

Conrad Humble rifle (left), and the Michael Humble rifle (right).

*continued on page 2*



Volumes have been written about the origin and development of the American longrifle with each author revealing another aspect of this intriguing utilitarian art form. Ironically, this style of American firearm has long been dubbed the **Kentucky Rifle**, although from a lack of known examples it is generally assumed that high quality artistic longrifles were not made in 18th century frontier Kentucky.

The article **New Light on an Old Name: The Origins of the Term Kentucky Rifle** by noted researcher, Alan D. Gutches, was featured in the summer 2009 issue of the Kentucky Rifle Association bulletin as well as the September 2009 issue of Muzzle Blast Magazine. Gutches discusses at length the origin of the moniker, Kentucky Rifle, revealing that the name was well established in American gun jargon by 1806. *Stating, "It [Kentucky Rifle] was being used to designate a type or style of American rifle, one primarily associated with the frontier, regardless of its actual place of original or intended region of use, exactly as the term is used today."*

## Getting Acquainted

Until recently, the name **Conrad Humble** was not associated with the Kentucky rifle; however, his younger brother, **Michael** is well documented and considered among the earliest gunsmiths in the Kentucky region. He established a gunshop at the "Falls of the Ohio" (now Louisville) as early as 1777 but only rumors of rifles signed by him have existed. In 2001, the first known rifle signed by elder brother Conrad Humble surfaced, and in 2007, after many years of searching, a rifle by Michael Humble was discovered. These two rifles have confirmed that fine rifles were indeed being produced in the



*C:Humble* signature on the first discovered rifle, along with his younger brother's *Mic:l:Humble* on a relic barrel.

Kentucky region during the 18th century.

Setting the stage to study the Humble brothers, we will start with their father Uriah Humble Jr., an English Protestant

immigrant arriving in Pennsylvania about 1733. He was naturalized in Philadelphia in 1740. On January 17, 1735 he married Charity Kuster in the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was the daughter of Conrad Kuster and Susannah Adams and was born in 1716 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

The name of the patriarch, Uriah Humble Jr., appears multiple times in Augusta County, Virginia records listed on several legal documents and inventories for wills - including the appraisal of the estate of his father-in-law, Conrad Kuster. Before leaving for Virginia, Uriah and Charity lived with either his father (or brother), Martin Humble in Rockhill Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Conrad, their eldest son, was born during this period with records varying on the exact date of his birth from 1738 to 1740. The Humble family was in Brocks Gap, then Augusta County, Virginia by 1751 and was some of the earliest settlers in that area. If Conrad moved with them he was in the valley of Virginia by age 12 but arrangements possibly were made for an apprenticeship, with him staying behind and not joining his family for several years. The first record of Conrad found in Augusta County is when he signed in teste on a deed dated June 10th, 1760. Thus, it is evident that Conrad was in Brocks Gap by his 21st year of life, just enough time for him to have finished an apprenticeship. His name appears in Augusta County records 1776 - 1777 as Captain in the Militia and again in Rockingham County in 1782, (which was established in 1778



This photo was taken by Pat Turner Ritchie, descendant of Conrad Humble and Richard Custer, from a cabin on top of North Mountain at Brocks Gap. The Dry River area, where the Humbles & Custers lived, is behind the ridge at the right of the photo.

from Augusta) but is not present on the 1783 rolls. It is apparent that Conrad Humble moved to Kentucky between 1782 and 1783. Michael Humble, was also born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and was 4 to 5 five years younger than Conrad. Born in 1744, he would have been 7 year's old when the family traveled down the Great Wagon Road moving into the Shenandoah Valley.

Brocks Gap is an opening in the Little North Mountain range through which the North Fork of the Shenandoah River flows, but the so-called region consists of 200 square miles in northwestern Rockingham County, Virginia. Jed Hotchkess, an educator and famous Civil War cartographer, who drew detailed maps of the Shenandoah Valley wrote, *"The region of Brock's Gap, inside, is large enough for a country by itself. I was not prepared to find as large a stream of water there as we did find, nor so much romantic scenery. All 'Germany' is inside, and it is some ways from the Gap.*

The sturdy German race prevails all over Rockingham, particularly so, it seems, in the Brock's Gap country. In years past the region was frequently called "Little Germany", and one of the streams that drain it is called German River." Primarily settled by German immigrants as early as 1740, the good land along the river and stream bottoms was quickly claimed and their descendants are still there some 250 years later.

## The Migration

In the early 1780's there was a rather large migration of several families from the Brock's Gap area of Rockingham County, Virginia who moved westward into the Kentucky frontier. There is quite a mystery about why so many otherwise entrenched Virginia families migrated during this same time period. Some members of these families were gunmakers, thus the skills and trades of the family names Humble, Kuster, Cain, Bryan, Berry, Lehrer, Mauk, Miller, and others came to Kentucky with them. It appears that Conrad Humble, now 42 years old, was part of this migration, moving to Bourbon County, [Kentucky region] Virginia. Why the move? Why now? It is apparent they moved soon after British Colonel Henry Byrd's attack on Ruddle's and Martin's Stations. The so-called Ruddle's Station had been first built by John Hinkston in 1775, on the South Fork of the Licking River, along an old game trail leading from McClelland's Station (now Scott County, Ky.) to the Lower Blue Licks.

However, Isaac Ruddle enlarged this station in 1779, giving it his name. Hinkston and the settlers that first built the station raised fifteen crude cabins and in 1776, Simon Kenton and Thomas Williams helped add a blockhouse. Although soon, during the year of the "bloody sevens" (1777), Indian threats caused its abandonment. Isaac Ruddle returned in 1779, adding cabins and fortified the blockhouse. About this same time, John Martin also returned

to his abandoned cabin four miles away on Stoner Creek and he and others built an additional station. In 1780 the Revolutionary War had made its way into the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky. In retaliation to the exploits of General George Rogers Clark, leader of the Kentucky Militia and the highest ranking American military officer on the northwestern frontier, Colonel Byrd advanced on these two settlements with both British troops and Indian allies. For the first time the Kentucky frontier faced artillery. Settlers knew they had little chance of holding out against a cannon and promptly surrendered to the British on the condition they would be taken captive and not killed. Byrd promised his Indian allies part of the plunder in return for not killing the settlers, but twenty were killed and scalped on the spot. Byrd had planned a much larger attack on the Kentucky settlements, but realizing that he had lost control of the situation and the Indians, he returned to

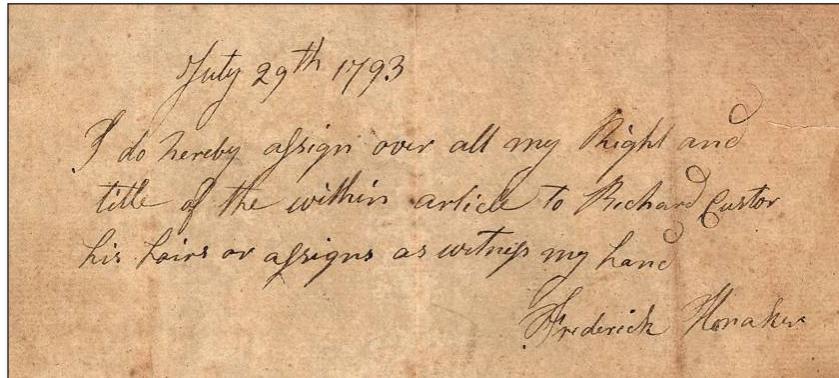
Detroit. The prisoners of both settlements, many of which were originally from the Brocks Gap region of Virginia, were forced to march on foot to the British stronghold at Detroit. Those that survived the devastating march were kept prisoner until the end of the Revolutionary War. If not for Byrd's restraint, the 1780 attack could have drastically changed the situation for the future of the Kentucky territory.

Conrad Humble, his wife Hannah (Adams) and their children Uriah, Jane, Charity, Noah, and Janet, settled just across the Licking River from Ruddle's and Martin's Stations acquiring property from John and Margaret Hinkston on February 9, 1783. Conrad had considerable land holdings and an extensive estate in Kentucky when he died and he is buried on top of an Indian mound near the location of his home and shop. His will was probated January 5, 1791, a little over a year before Kentucky achieved statehood in June of 1792. His estate inventory contained 20 gun barrels, 10 gunlocks, 22 assorted files, a full set of smithing tools and a vast array of what would have been considered in that day luxury household items; as well as 4 slaves, 5 horses, 18 head of cattle, 8 sheep, 8 hogs, 50 chickens, a watch, a rifled gun, tomahawk, and knife. He was obviously a very wealthy and affluent man.

## A Gunsmithing Family

As students of these icons of America's past, it is only natural for us to wonder where Conrad and Michael Humble learned their trade. Their work is similar with some associated traits, yet

is very different, and after close study of the individual rifles one wonders if they were not taught by different masters. Conrad's work seems much more refined and graceful and perhaps exhibits a more talented hand. Michael's work provokes intrigue, and his designs were carried off very successfully, although



from a gunbuilders perspective he was literally flirting with design disaster. Little can really be assumed about the overall spectrum of their work with only one signed firearm known from each gunsmith. However, Michael's sole example gives the impression of being influenced by different rifles encountered and is somewhat radical with the mixing of regional characteristics. Conrad's simple yet elegant rifle shows a well trained, very seasoned, professional gunbuilder.

We can wonder if their father, Uriah, was a gunsmith who brought the trade to America with him. Or, perhaps their Grandfather Kustar (found spelled, Kustar, Kuster, Kester, Custer, Custard) on their mother's side was the basis for their training? Conrad Humble's son-in-law (and cousin) Richard Kuster Sr. (1757-1837) and his bother Joseph (1753-1835) were both gunsmiths. Tax records indicate that Joseph Kester [Kuster]



## The Rifles and their Makers

The last will and testament of **Conrad Humble**, dated January 5, 1791, states: “I, *Conrad Humble, of the County of Bourbon and District of Kentucky, Gunsmith; being sick and weak in body but of perfect mind...*” This type of document along with a signed rifle is rare. This notable rifle is very well made, has pleasing architecture and is long and graceful. The .56 caliber, tapered and flared rifled barrel is 45 ¼ inches long. The original flint English trade lock is marked “Kotland” on the inside and dates from the 1780’s. It’s a large lock measuring a full 6 inches in length. The stock is quarter sawn sugar maple with bold curl and it is relief carved around the breech pin and behind the cheek piece. It retains the original wooden patchbox cover which is decorated with two wedding band type moldings.

These lid mouldings match the full length forestock. The mounts are brass, including the feather-hole inlay on the toe of the rifle. Legend tells us this was used to hold a Blue-Jay feather; a bird the pioneers hated and killed at every opportunity as their squawking alarm often warned the Natives of an encroaching white intruder. This big bore rifle was made for, and in, frontier Kentucky at a time when there was incessant conflict with the Indians and an abundance of large game... bear, buffalo, and elk.

There is similarity between the work of Conrad Humble and that of George Schroyer. Several students have suggested that Humble studied with Schroyer, that being the reason for the similarities. However, George Schroyer and Conrad Humble were contemporaries; they were the same age being born within months of one another. There are rifles by George Sites (1771-1850) and another signed Henry Fister (1752-1822), both from Rockingham County, that strongly relate to York County’s George Schroyer, as well as the work of Conrad Humble. Research by Wallace Gusler, reveals that a Lewis Schroyer was taxed as a gunsmith in Rockingham County for several years. It is suggested by the research of Dr. George Shumway that George Schroyer at least finished his training in Reading, Pennsylvania and worked there from 1763 to 1768. He then disappears for 6 or 7 years before re-appearing and becoming a noted gunsmith in Hanover, York County, Pennsylvania. Conrad Humble was born and raised only 35 miles east of

The Conrad Humble rifle retains its original wooden patchbox cover which is decorated with two wedding band type moldings that match the moulding along the length of the forestock.

was an active gunsmith in the Brocks Gap region from 1762 through 1787. He then moved to Harrison County, [West] Virginia. Richard Kustar Sr., his son Richard Kustar Jr., as well as R.K Jr.s, son-in-law, William Hevener are all documented gunsmiths. When Conrad Humble left Brocks Gap, he sold his farm to Frederick Honaker, also a gunsmith and on July 29th, 1793, son-in-law Richard Custer Sr. bought back the Humble farm and it remains in the Custer family to this day.

The gun work of the Custer and Hevener families is well documented, as these families continued the tradition of the gunsmithing trade throughout the years of the Civil War.

*William Sites debt to William Hevener to boring and grinding 30 gun barrels in the year of 1825 and 1826 at \$1.75 Cts. Per barrel - \$52.50 Rockingham County September 2nd, 1826*

*This day came before me, George Dove a Justice of the Peace in and for said county. William Hevener proved the above account to be just and true as it stands stated by the oath of James Sutherland.*

*Given under my and the day date above written.*

*George Dove*

One of many records providing insight into Rockingham County’s gunsmithing industry.

The first rifle discovered signed: *C:Humble*.

Photo by Ric Lambert

Reading, and less than 20 miles south from the Allentown – Bethlehem region. Living this close to early gunmaking centers there would have been multiple apprenticeship opportunities, and it is possible that George Schroyer and Conrad Humble were trained by the same master.

**Michael Humble** is first found as a member of the party laying out Kentucky’s first permanent settlement on June 16, 1774. Temple Bodley, wrote in his **History of Kentucky**, “1774 was a year of outstanding importance in the history of Kentucky for it



Box side of the C:Humble rifle



Cheek side of the C:Humble rifle.



was then that the first attempt was made to found a settlement there. Among the men who had been members of Bullitt's party surveying lands along the Ohio two years before was James Harrod. He then learned of the rich Bluegrass region of central Kentucky and determined to settle there. On his return to the Monongahela region he gathered a party of about 50 frontiersmen and in the spring of 1774 went down the Ohio and up the Kentucky to a point afterward called Harrod's Landing, and thence a short distance overland to the head of Dick's River. There they laid out lots and began building log cabins for a town, which they called **Harrodstown**."

Michael Humble was a Captain in Colonel John Bowman's Company of the Kentucky County, Virginia Militia in 1777. He was under the command of General George Rogers Clark and on the muster roll of Captain James Harrods's company in 1779. On May 1st, 1780, the Virginia General Assembly and then Governor Thomas Jefferson approved the town charter of Louisville. Early Kentucky surveyor Colonel John Floyd, was placed on the town's board of trustees and given the responsibility to plan and lay out

an apprentice on February 18, 1782. This indenture reads, "... James Steward of the County of Jefferson of the one part and Michael Humble of the county of **Lincoln** of the other part..."; making it obvious that Michael had left Louisville and moved to Mercer County (then Lincoln County) by 1782.

In reading, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia ~ 1769 to 1792* by James Rood Robertson, we find that Michael Humble was an active citizen and signed the 1785 petition to the Virginia Assembly for the request of an Act to establishing a town in Lincoln County; Harrodsburg, Kentucky's first permanent settlement. And, most importantly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky, in August 1787 he signed the act concerning the erection of the district of Kentucky into an independent state. It was almost 5 years before Kentucky attained statehood, becoming the fifteenth state admitted to the union on the 1st day of June, 1792.

Not only was Michael Humble a gunsmith but also a gaming sportsman with one of the first "race paths" in the region. Lincoln County court records report that: "April 1, 1783; The first horse

the town. Jefferson County, named after Thomas Jefferson, was formed at this time as one of three original Kentucky counties from the old Kentucky County, Virginia. Louisville was the county seat. Humble's gunsmith shop was near 12th and Main streets on lot # 91 under the protection of the guns of Fort Nelson. He was an armorer in the forces of General Clark and not only made and repaired ordinary rifles but documents indicate he made Fort-Guns and wall pieces for the protection of the frontier posts in the vicinity of Louisville. Michael Humble took on James Stewart as

race took place at "Humble's Race Paths," near Harrodsburg and for betting on a mare worth 12 pounds at the later, Hugh McGary was tried at Oyer and Terminer Court in August and found guilty. The opinion of the court was that said Hugh McGary, gentleman, be deemed an infamous gambler and that he shall not be eligible to any office of trust or honor with in this state." Maria T. Daviess, historian and author of the **Mercer County History** book, put it aptly when she wrote about this record, "Such a procedure now [1924] would sweep gentlemen from the track as a cyclone does



to the forest!” It should be mentioned that Hugh McGary was accused of provoking the disaster at the Battle of Blue Licks, rightfully considered one of the worst American military defeats of the Revolutionary War. This judgment may have had more to do with the politics of his actions in that event, than betting on a friendly horse race.

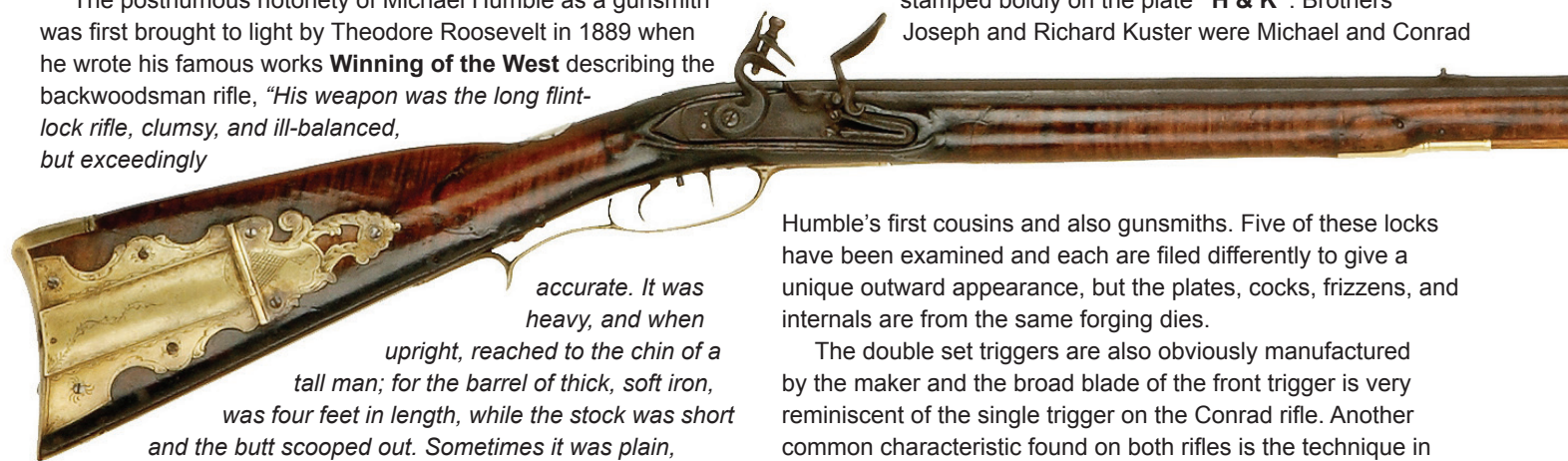
No evidence is found suggesting that Michael Humble ever left



The grave site of Michael Humble and his second wife Nancy.

Kentucky after his arrival in the early 1770's and he died there in 1818. His grave is at the site of his home, race path, and gunshop on Mock's Branch, near the Mercer/Boyle County line.

The posthumous notoriety of Michael Humble as a gunsmith was first brought to light by Theodore Roosevelt in 1889 when he wrote his famous works **Winning of the West** describing the backwoodsman rifle, “His weapon was the long flintlock rifle, clumsy, and ill-balanced, but exceedingly



accurate. It was heavy, and when upright, reached to the chin of a tall man; for the barrel of thick, soft iron, was four feet in length, while the stock was short and the butt scooped out. Sometimes it was plain, sometimes ornamented...”

This excerpt has a footnote reference that reads; “<sup>2</sup>.The above is the description of one of Boon's rifles. According to the inscription on the barrel it was made at Louisville (Ky.), in 1782, by **M. Humble**. It is perfectly plain; whereas one of Floyd's rifles, which I have also seen, is much more highly finished, and with some ornamentation.”

Then seven years later in 1896, J. Stoddard Johnston writes in his **Memorial History of Louisville from Its First Settlement to the Year 1896**, “On lot No. 91, owned by James Harris, on Twelfth below Main, the gunsmith shop of **Michael Humble** was situated, and on No. 92, owned by Henry French, the blacksmith shop of William Spangler. Humble made and mended guns and did the finer work in metal, while Spangler turned out agricultural implements and did the coarser work. In the shop of Humble

pewter spoons and plates were moulded, scalping knives made and many kinds of hardware repaired. Humble made a rifle for **Colonel John Floyd** which yet exists, and another for **Colonel Daniel Boone**, which is preserved and belongs to the writer. In the shop of Spangler implements were made, horses shod, nails wrought and all kinds of tools repaired. Scarcely anything in metal was needed by the pioneers which could not be made or mended in one or the other of these shops.” These two documents provide a firm foundation for this study, giving good description of the overall work of Mic'l Humble, the location of his early shop, and the names of the well-known owners of two of his rifles.

This rifle by Michael Humble appears to exhibit elements of design using innovative artistic license taken by a maker not bound by the rules of regional characteristics. However, this may prove incorrect as other rifles turn up and this lone example may become a key to a much more complex series or “school”. It has bold butt-stock architecture provoking a feel that is off-times related to the Reading, Pennsylvania area. However, the brass box, carving, and large oval cheek inlay makes one think York County upon first impression. Then, from out in left field, he throws in the fantastic cheek piece molding decoration fashioned from eight sterling silver triangles, each cleanly engraved making a unique and dramatic artistic statement. The unrefined hand-hammered rifled barrel has a Masonic “compass and square” touch mark on the bottom flat. If in fact Michael Humble forged this barrel, this probably indicates that he was a Free and Accepted Mason. The barrel is approximately .58 caliber, tapered and flared, and 47 ¼ inches long. The un-altered flintlock is stamped boldly on the plate “**H & K**”. Brothers Joseph and Richard Kuster were Michael and Conrad

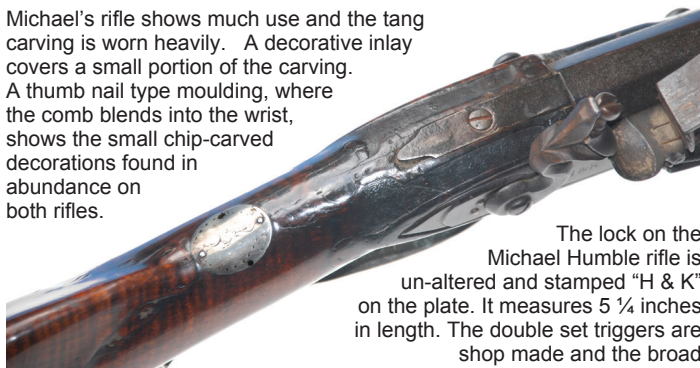
Humble's first cousins and also gunsmiths. Five of these locks have been examined and each are filed differently to give a unique outward appearance, but the plates, cocks, frizzens, and internals are from the same forging dies.

The double set triggers are also obviously manufactured by the maker and the broad blade of the front trigger is very reminiscent of the single trigger on the Conrad rifle. Another common characteristic found on both rifles is the technique in which the front lock/sideplate mortise is carved with the front beaver tail decorations terminating at right angles to the molding line on either side of the trigger guard. The alternate beaver tail type moldings at the rear of the lock mortise, terminating into the wrist on each of these rifles, are completely different and stylistically needed to be. The beaver tails on Conrad's rifle are very large and bold adding to the flowing lines of the architecture of the rifle. This element of design on Michael's rifle is rather diminutive, helping greatly to combat the awkwardness in the wrist area caused by the tail of the lock being cocked up above the center line.

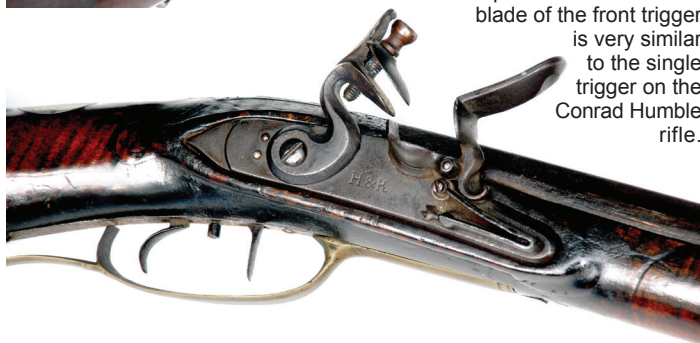
Bold relief carving is found in front and behind the prominent cheek piece and as already mentioned, an unusual cheek decoration of 8 silver triangles (four are missing) is found along the



Michael's rifle shows much use and the tang carving is worn heavily. A decorative inlay covers a small portion of the carving. A thumb nail type moulding, where the comb blends into the wrist, shows the small chip-carved decorations found in abundance on both rifles.



The lock on the Michael Humble rifle is un-altered and stamped "H & K" on the plate. It measures 5 1/4 inches in length. The double set triggers are shop made and the broad blade of the front trigger is very similar to the single trigger on the Conrad Humble rifle.



edge of the cheek piece. This complements a large silver oval that is inlaid above and engraved with a hunters star. Relief carving is also present around and behind the breech pin although well worn and partially covered by the later added silver wrist escutcheon. This is adjacent to a thumbnail shaped molding defining the comb where it blends into the wrist. The forestock molding and relief carving at the tail piece is almost completely worn away. The elaborate brass patch box has a single piercing in the finial



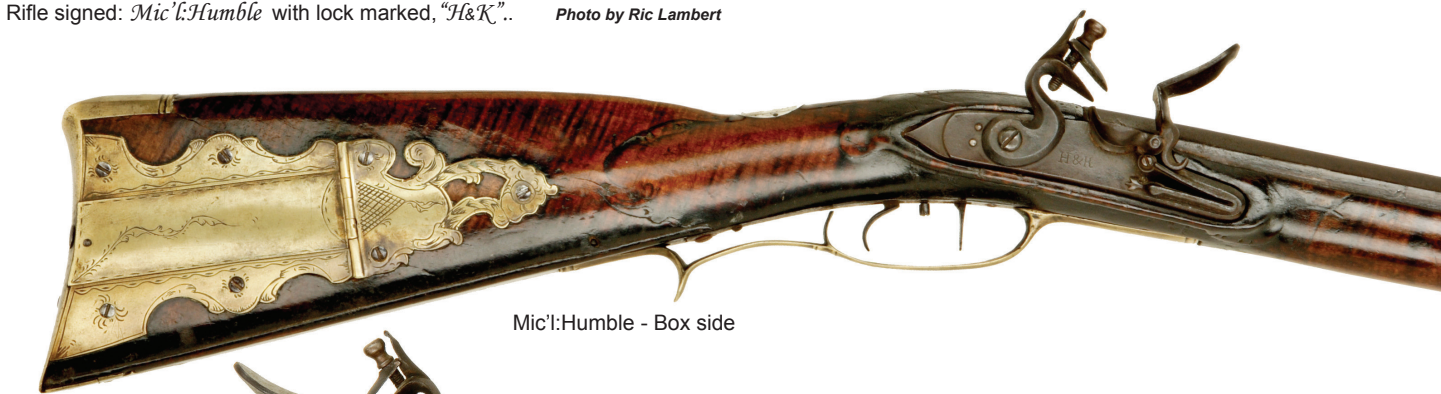
Perhaps the most striking feature of Michael Humble's rifle is the unusual addition of 8 silver triangles along the edge of the cheek piece. A large silver oval is inlaid above, engraved with a hunters star.

and is tastefully engraved. The side panels of the box seem to be associated with similar designs found on later Kentucky made rifles by the Bryan, Graham, Klinkenbeard, Mauk, Simpson, West, and Young families.

Most students of the Kentucky Rifle agree this firearm dates from the mid-to-late 1780's, with the butt being just shy of two inches in width, considered indicative of this period. It is logically evident that it was either made at the Falls of the Ohio, now Louisville, or in Mercer County, Kentucky, between Danville and Harrodsburg. Michael was an excellent metal worker and although his engraving hand is a bit heavy, his designs take this in consideration and the decorations are gracefully bold and very pleasing to the eye. His carving is nicely designed and well executed, blending well with all other elements of his creativity. Each of the Humble gunsmiths had artistic talent and both rifles show much sophistication. This example of Michael's work shows some hold over from earlier gunmaking methods, specifically his



Rifle signed: *Mic'l:Humble* with lock marked, "H&K".. Photo by Ric Lambert



Mic'l:Humble - Box side



Mic'l:Humble - Cheek side





A common characteristic of both rifles is the method in which the front lock/sideplate mortise is carved, with the front beaver tail decorations terminating at right angles to the molding line either side of the trigger guard.



Simple engraving is found along the ramrod channel of the nose piece of Michael's rifle, and a screw holds the fore-end to the barrel.

A profile view shows the engraving also found along the upper edge next to the barrel. Notice the deep rifling in the muzzle.



use of a screw thru the nosepiece directly into the bottom flat of the barrel, holding the very front end of the forestock to the barrel. A similar characteristic is associated with rifles from the Reading, Berks County, Pennsylvania region. However, unlike those examples that depend on this screw to hold the nosepiece to the stock as well as the stock to the barrel, in this case the extra long nosepiece is pinned to the forestock with two copper rivets in the same method as the nosepiece of the Conrad rifle. The fore-end screw on Michael's rifle is designed specifically to hold the forestock to the barrel and he has added simple but delightful engraved decorations along both the top and the bottom of the nose cap.

## Synopsis

After more than 8 years of study on these Humble Kentucky gunsmiths, there are still many unanswered questions. Where are the earlier rifles by these brothers? Conrad Humble was over 40 years of age when he moved to Kentucky and had already spent the majority of his productive years as a gunsmith in the Valley of Virginia. There is one recently identified rifle that exhibits an adequate amount of commonalities to build a case for its attribution to the Humble shop. Hopefully this newly identified rifle, with its abundance of fine detail, will single out other examples of early work by these two makers. Research, combined with the analysis of noted gunsmith and antique conservator, Frank House, has revealed that the Brocks Gap area of Rockingham County was a major gunmaking center. It is evident that the Humbles, their Kuster in-laws, and other cousins were a motivating force in the commerce of that area and they continued to be in Kentucky. In all probability, the majority of Michael Humble's work was repair or the re-stocking of barrels, locks, and hardware of broken but cherished weapons that had fed and protected the pioneer settlers pouring into the mythical Promised Land called Kain-tuck-ee. Michael's productive years were spent serving the needs of migrating immigrants that

would have come with rifles in hand. With this in mind, his total production of rifles was probably much less than most practicing gunsmiths back east.

Studying these particular examples, it is easy to forget that both Conrad and Michael Humble were *early* American gunsmiths. Putting this into perspective; Jacob Dickert, George Schroyer, and Conrad Humble were all born within 12 months and a 60 mile radius of one another. These gunmakers were 7 or 8 years old when Christian Oerter was born in 1747 in Frederickstown, only 20 miles away from Conrad and Michael's birthplace and J.P. Beck of Lebanon, Pennsylvania was not born until 1751, another four years later.

There is record of Conrad Humble buying: *500 hundred acres on Clear Creek in Jefferson County, June 21st, 1780 and 1,285 additional acres - 5 miles down river from the mouth of the Licking River and on the banks of the Ohio River, August 9th 1784.* Rockingham County Virginia personal property tax records show that Conrad Humble left Brocks Gap moving to Bourbon County, Kentucky Region Virginia between 1782 and 1783. From comparing this rifle to others that are dated, it is unlikely that Conrad's wood box rifle will pre-date 1782, and safe to assume that it is a product of frontier Kentucky. As there is no record of Michael Humble ever leaving the Kentucky region after his arrival as early as 1774 and his death and burial in Kentucky in 1818, there is no doubt that his rifle was produced either in Louisville at the Falls of the Ohio, or in Mercer County between Danville and Harrodsburg.

For years, rifles have been classified by the schools that were identified and labeled by Joe Kindig Jr. in his priceless tome, *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age*; although his work concentrated on Pennsylvania with only small mention of other areas. Through the efforts of the Kentucky Rifle Association and the dedicated regional study by students including: John Bivins, Wallace Gusler, Dan Hartzler, Bill Ivey, Curt Johnson, George Shumway, James Whisker, naming only a few, many individual "schools" or groups have also been identified in the Virginia's, Carolina's, Maryland, Ohio, Illinois and other





A comparison of the large elongated beaver tails on the Conrad Humble, (above) to the short almost "stubby" feature on the rifle by Michael Humble. Notice that both sideplates, and the way the front of the lock/sideplate mouldings are carved, are almost identical.

geographic regions.

As study of Kentucky rifles has continued since Kindig's foundation book and his theories presented, rifles have surfaced exhibiting mixed traits considered indicative of specific geographic regions. Many also display seemingly out-of-place characteristics that have been assigned to specific periods of chronological time. The heel of the butt-piece on the Conrad rifle immediately implies it was produced after 1800. Upon close examination, the lock, barrel, and hardware are all first generation use and with that assessment along with a death date from his last will and testament, we know the rifle had to be made before 1791. Why the pinched and elongated heel on the butt-plate? This is a trait we consider much later, but other than this the rifle appears to easily date within the mid 1780's, considerably earlier than this detail suggests. Research is ongoing and is not only focused on the Humble family but a whole group of associated longrifles that have been categorized "migration guns", most of which show influence from makers with roots in close proximity to Brocks Gap, Rockingham County, Virginia. This subject will be broached and presented in detail in a future publication.

Study of the Kentucky rifle together with numerous other Cultural Studies, is helping bring about better understanding of the early American frontier. Awareness of the utilitarian nature of America's early settlers revealed by their rifles and companion powder horns give great insight into the spirit of the daring and brave who settled our nation, winning the liberty and freedom we are blessed with today. Personalities of these pioneers, and signs of the times, are ingenuously expressed and recorded in their artwork. The Kentucky rifle is an all-important tool, made and used to forge our very existence. Borrowing words of John G.W. Dillin, "it was a model often slightly varied but never radically changed". Yet, the intrigue and study of the subtle artistic variances by these countless early American artists and craftsmen has brought to so many, so very much comfort and pleasure.

**Mel Hankla ~ Kentucky ~ 2009**

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