

# Show Me the Hawken!

by Jeffrey J. Jaeger

Missouri legislators voted on May 10, 2023 and passed a bill that designates the Hawken rifle as Missouri's official state rifle. The original House bill (HB 224) was sponsored by Representative Mazzie Boyd(R) and was subsequently attached to a Senate bill in order to expedite the outcome. The action, pending Governor Parson's signature, marks Missouri as the 7th state in the Union to elevate a rifle to official state status. Representative Doug Clemmons (D) co-sponsored the original bill.



Representatives Mazzie Boyd (R) and Doug Clemmons (D) proudly display an original Hawken, soon to be the state's official rifle.

The genesis of the state rifle concept came from retired Missouri State Trooper, Kyle Carroll, who approached Representative Boyd in the Fall of 2022.

Boyd was supportive of the idea and prefiled the legislation in December of that year. According to Carroll, “There was never any opposition to the bill, but it never would have passed without the diligence of Representative Boyd. I can tell you that there were around 3,000 ‘no-budget-related’ bills filed during the session. Thirty-four made it to the finish line.” Carroll expounded, “It’s never easy.”

Representative Boyd commented on the importance of a state rifle saying it, “bolsters the 2nd Amendment because we are appreciating and respecting the very right to keep and bear arms.” She added, “We are also appreciating the great people like Samuel and Jacob Hawken who were masters at their craft and were upstanding Missourians that had a business that truly had a huge part in the development of the West.”

Gunsmith Samuel Hawken was born in Pennsylvania in 1792 and learned his gunsmithing skills from his father, Christian Hawken, before starting his journey to Missouri. He joined his older brother Jacob at his St. Louis gun shop in 1822 and retired there in 1861 after a short stint in Denver, Colorado.



An original Samuel Hawken Plains Rifle(top) served as a model for a bench copy by Bob Browner (bottom). Photo by J. Jaeger

The Hawken rifle became a favorite among mountain men. Co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, William Henry Ashley, and army scouts Jim Bridger and Kit Carson carried Hawken rifles. Their rifle selection bolstered the brand and it soon became the favorite among frontiersmen, trappers, hunters, and westbound pioneers. The Hawken brothers and their rifles left an indelible mark on Western American history.

The “Hawken” was prized for its robust build, reliability, and accuracy. A typical build had a barrel between 28” and 36” in length and a bore of 50 to 58 caliber. The stock was of maple or walnut and the furniture was iron. Often the sights were fixed but sometimes had an adjustable rear buckhorn sight for assistance with long-range shots. The half-stock design sported a pewter nose cap and double barrel keys with oval escutcheons. The scrolled iron trigger guard had no spurs to catch on clothing.



The buckhorn rear sights, iron scroll trigger guard, oval barrel key escutcheon, and beavertail cheekpiece are classic Hawken features as shown on the original Samuel Hawken(top) and recent Bob Browner bench copy(bottom). Photo by J. Jaeger



State rifle advocate and veteran St. Louis antique arms dealer, Greg Grimes, added that in addition to gun making, “the Hawken brothers...repaired and made tools such as axes, tomahawks, and hatchets for the fur companies. Ledgers indicate trap repair and iron hinge fabrication as well.”

The maker of the Hawken bench copy is a St. Louis native and master gunsmith, Bob Browner. He began his gunsmithing career more than fifty years ago as a trainee of master gunsmiths Kieth Neubauer and Ralph Hader. Browner's reputation for quality and precision earned him the gunsmithing job for the Hawken copy. When congratulated on being chosen for the project, Browner modestly replied that he was "just the gunsmith. The hard work was done by grass-roots people like Kyle Carroll, Art Ressel, Paul Fennwald, David Wright, Greg Grimes, and Bob Woodfill to name a few."



*Portrait of Bob Browner, Gunsmith*



Above: Original Hawken signature on the top barrel flat(top) and the bench copy barrel stamp(bottom).  
The bench copy also bears the name of the maker, “Robert V. Browner” on a side barrel flat. Photo by J. Jaeger