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You can shoot a real Hawken – for free – at the 2023 Hawken Classic in Missouri. Visitors are invited to try shooting a traditional muzzleloading rifle, including this rare original 1840s vintage Hawken rifle generously provided by Greg Roberts of the Hawken Shop.

HAWKEN CLASSIC

A historic celebration of St. Louis rifles and the opening of the Western frontier.

STORY BY FRANK JARDIM • PHOTOS BY GEMMER MUZZLELOADING GUN CLUB



Percussion J&S Hawken rifle made in 1836 for George W. Atchison, hero of the Blackhawk War and later steamboat pilot and shipping magnate. It is the most documented and highly embellished Hawken rifle known. (ROCK ISLAND AUCTION COMPANY)

This August 25-27, from Friday to Sunday, make a trip to Missouri to attend the 2023 Hawken Classic. It's the second in a series of four outstanding annual programs where over 100 historic reenactors, craftsmen, sutlers, and some of the leading and most knowledgeable collectors of Hawken and other St. Louis firearms made from the 1820s through the 1850s will gather to celebrate the 200th anniversary of America's first nationally famous high-end sporting arms brand created by brothers Jacob and Samuel Hawken. The event, held at the Historic Daniel Boone Home in Defiance, Missouri, will allow visitors to learn about the expansion of the American West and the contributions made by Hawken rifles, as well as those made by their lesser known competitors.

There are two really amazing things going on at this three-day event. The first is a one-of-a-kind graduate school level opportunity to learn about Hawken and other St. Louis gunmakers through unprecedented access to experts in the field who have collectively spent over 100 years researching and millions of dollars building private collections that include many of the most important and outstanding original firearms extant. These antique arms are rarely, if ever, seen by the general public. Throughout the event, an exhibition of approximately 75 rifles, shotguns and pistols will be on display at the Sappington House, located on the west side of the Boone Home site, a short walk from the Boone house itself. The collection was curated by four advanced collectors who will be present to answer visitor questions.

For those with a serious interest in American firearms history, and

the guns of the Hawken brothers and their St. Louis contemporaries like H.E. Dimick and J.P. Gemmer, think of this as akin to walking in on some esteemed university professors during their office hours and having an in-depth discussion without having enrolled in the school or paying the average rate of \$1,000 per credit hour that graduate school classes cost. Those kinds of introductions are hard to get in the real world, just like an up-close look at these rare guns.

THE SECOND ASPECT of the Hawken Classic is a great public/living history program for kids and adults alike. Families, students, history buffs and the merely history curious can experience the sights and sounds of a frontier village populated by tradesmen and camping mountain men during rendezvous when they gathered to sell their furs, resupply for the next venture and socialize. Visitors can try their

hand at learning some of the skill sets that allowed the intrepid explorers, hunters, prospectors and fighting men of a fledgling nation to survive in, and ultimately thrive in, the wild frontier west of St. Louis, Missouri.

The adventurous independence of spirit that characterized so many of the restless, freedom-loving people of early America wasn't cowed by fears of starvation and hardship, crossing vast distances and uncharted areas, deadly heat or cold, hostile Indians, lethal predators or seemingly impassable terrain. Rugged and often rough-hewn, they relied on themselves to meet every challenge, every day. Their legacy is still present in every American who will not be deterred from the pursuit of their dreams, bravely does what needs to be done, and doesn't tolerate anyone telling them what to think.

Though their motivations and goals varied in the 40 years that



Historic reenactors will bring their expertise to the event at the Boone Home at Lindenwood Park in Defiance, Missouri, turning the 19th century village site into an educational rendezvous-like experience for visitors to learn about many aspects of Western exploration from the early fur trade years of the 1820s through the 1850s.



The exhibition of original arms is one of the largest ever assembled for public display, offering an unprecedented opportunity for visitors to study them up close and get their questions answered by collectors who are experts in the field.

they trekked the plains and Rocky Mountains between the Mississippi River and the Pacific coastline, they were then, and are still today, called *mountain men*. The likes of Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Seth Kinman, Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, Hugh Glass, Jim Beckwourth, and John “Liver-Eating” Johnson (the real-life inspiration for the fictional Jeremiah Johnson) were well known in their day. Most of their fellow frontiersmen are forgotten, but their combined efforts paved the way for White settlement and the fulfillment of what Americans of the era saw as their Manifest Destiny to control the continent from ocean to ocean.

There will be ongoing demonstrations around the site by men and women in authentic period attire. Visitors are encouraged to explore the rendezvous encampment and engage the mountain men with their questions. Some may look scary, but they are there to share their love of the time period with visitors and delight in presenting “living history.”

The Early Arkansas Reenactors Association will exhibit their full-scale replica keel boat. This type of vessel



Of course there will be genuine antique Hawken rifles to see up close, along with many other St. Louis-made guns of the period.

was used extensively to move men and goods in and out of the frontier along rivers in the mid-1800s. Visitors can board the craft for a crew’s eye view of the compact boat and learn about the skills needed to operate and navigate it along the river highways of the West.

The Rendezvous Competition is an event within the event that I consider a must-see for visitors. Reenactors will stage the pageantry and braggadocio of an actual mountain man shooting, knife- and tomahawk-throwing, and fire-starting contest, minus the drunkenness and obscenity for the sake of a family audience.

Craftsmen, many of them recognized as artists in their specialties, will be demonstrating how to weave a basket, forge a Bowie knife in the manner of a frontier blacksmith, work wood with hand tools, start fires with only those

materials gathered from the ground, and more, now nearly forgotten, skills that were common knowledge in the 1800s. Some of these activities are participatory, like fire-starting, traditional archery (the modern compound bow wasn’t invented until the 1960s), and shooting black powder muzzleloading rifles.

AS THE HAWKEN Classic is sponsored by the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association with the goal of educating the public about the role of the iconic Hawken rifle in America’s history, the NMLRA will set up a free shooting range where visitors can try firing traditional black powder muzzleloading guns, including a rare original 1840s vintage Hawken rifle generously provided by Greg Roberts of the Hawken Shop.

Visitors who have their own

traditional-style replica percussion or flintlock muzzleloading long guns and pistols, Hawken or otherwise, are encouraged to bring them to demonstrate their offhand shooting skill (or lack thereof) on the range's 25-, 50- and 75-yard hanging steel targets. Bring powder, ball/shot, patches and priming for your own guns and remember to get them tagged at the gate when you enter. There will be an NMLRA-certified range officer present to oversee range safety. Shooters will have four firing lines spaced out about 25 yards apart. Each shooter can fire once at each of the three targets in their line for fun and the challenge. Depending on how busy the shooting range is, more shots for each shooter may be allowed. A range waiver must be read and signed by everyone who wants to shoot. No modern guns will be allowed on the range.

In addition to the shooting and living history program, several one-hour-long educational seminars will be held each day in the pavilion. The lectures will be conducted by experts whose breadth of study in their subjects greatly exceeds anything one could expect to find in a typical university setting. Unlike college classes, these fun, factual and often deep-diving seminars are also completely free, limited only by available seating. Seminars conclude with ample time for questions from the audience and discussion. Some seminars are repeated on multiple days.

Among other presentations, Bob Woodfill will speak on "The Flintlock Hawken"; Wilson Windham (Masonic Mountain Men) will present "The Mountain Men Era and the Hawken"; Greg Roberts and Art Ressel will deliver a lecture on "The History of the Hawken Rifle"; and Benjamin Gall will lecture on "Supplying the American Fur Company: The Hawken Brothers in St. Louis". Pablo Baum will deliver three exciting lectures of frontier adventure and mayhem: "The Incident at Skull Lick Creek", "Treachery on the Oregon Trail: The Donner Party", and "Terror on the Santa Fe Trail". Dick Walsh will present "Brain Tanning: An Easy Guide", and Bob Browner, an accomplished traditional gunsmith who has built many Hawkens, will lecture on "Building



Roberts lectures on the history of the Hawken rifle. A dozen free seminars will be held over three days by recognized experts on this and other subjects like the mountain man era, the fur trade, brain tanning, etc.



You can get what you need to make your own Hawken too. Last year Rice Barrels, one of the most respected makers of top-quality barrels for traditional muzzleloaders, attended the event.



There will be many vendors of 1820s-1850s period replica products including clothing if you want to equip yourself from head to toe like a mountain man.



The Hawken Shop will set up a combination historic display and retail store in the village where you can inspect, and place an order for, a contemporary Hawken rifle.

the Hawken Rifle.” Finally, Jack Mitch, Gerry Messmer and Scott Amish Staggs will present “William Ashley’s Return From His First Rendezvous and The Super Hawken.” Visit gemmermuzzleloadingclub.com for the latest schedule of seminars and events.

THE 2023 HAWKEN Classic will be held at the Historic Daniel Boone Home at Lindenwood Park, which is about 35 miles west of downtown St. Louis in Defiance, Missouri. The site is a composite early 19th century pioneer village that includes over a dozen structures original to the site, as well as historic buildings relocated there from other parts of the state. The main focus of the village is the elegant two-story stone house situated on high ground at the southeastern edge of the settlement. The largely Georgian-style house was built by Nathan Boone, Daniel Boone’s youngest son, as a residence at the start of the 1800s. He lived there until 1837 when he moved his family farther south. The house is closely associated with Daniel Boone because in 1804, shortly after it was completed, Daniel and his wife Rebecca moved in with Nathan and his family and spent most of their time there through 1813 and then again from 1816 to 1820 when the great frontiersman died on the premises. Tours of the house are offered by the park for a fee (\$8 adults and \$5 children), but only the first floor and lower level are wheelchair accessible. Fortunately, the rest of the Hawken Classic activities are handicapped friendly, and there will be golf carts onsite to assist those with mobility limitations.



Visitors are free to explore the period rendezvous encampment to see how the mountain men lived.

The event and its activities, excluding tours of the Boone Home and food, are free. Parking is free too. If you aren’t bringing your own food and drinks to picnic, you can buy them onsite from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day. Cheeseburgers top the menu at \$6, but you can get a hotdog for \$2. If you have any folding money, there’ll be reproductions of all manner of early 1800s merchandise, short of complete rifles, for sale at the event from some of the best vendors



Visitors are encouraged to bring their own traditional muzzleloader, along with caps, balls and powder, to shoot for fun on the free steel target range.



This "S. Hawken St. Louis" barrel stamp indicates the rifle was made after the death of Jacob Hawken in the cholera epidemic of 1849.

THE HAWKEN CLASSIC ST. LOUIS ANTIQUE ARMS EXHIBIT AT SAPPINGTON HOUSE

By the geographic virtue of its location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, St. Louis became the gateway to the West. Many commercial and exploratory ventures were launched into the wilderness there. Most returned. Gradually, as the decades passed, the frontier west of the Mississippi was explored to exploit its wealth of resources in furs and gold, and trails were opened up to effect White settlement. Whether actually settling or just passing through, the frontier was a dangerous place for Whites to be. It was exactly the kind of place where you really needed solid, reliable guns. Native Indian tribes remained a threat until the United States Army concluded the Indian Wars at the end of the 19th century.

As a result, from the 1820s through the 1850s, St. Louis, Missouri, was a great place to be a gunmaker. It was there that the Hawken brothers made a name for themselves producing



St. Louis shotguns made by Schilling, Meier, Albright, Scott and Gemmer.

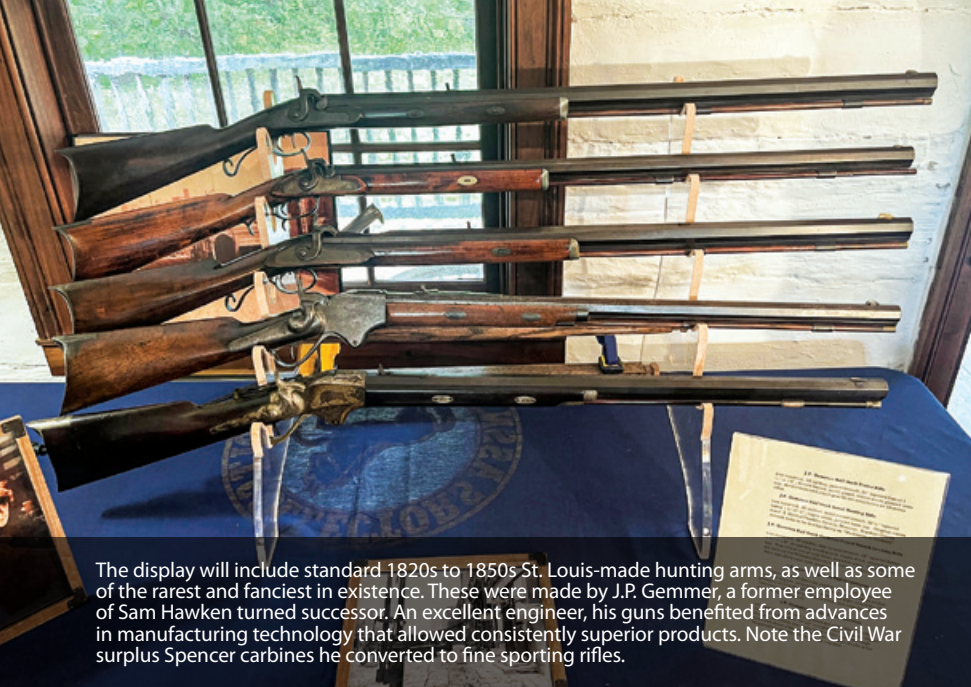
excellent arms. Hawken became synonymous with quality, durability and accuracy, and they were America's first nationally famous, top-tier sporting arms brand. They proudly marked their guns with their name in various ways and places to indicate their pedigree.

Contrary to myth, Hawken rifles

weren't ubiquitous on the frontier. They were expensive and just like today, not everyone can own a Cadillac. In their period of greatest production, they made only about 200 rifles a year. The majority were sold into the local market around St. Louis rather than to mountain men. This created an opportunity for other

Some of the many original Hawken and Hawken-style rifles from private collections that will be on display for close inspection at the Sappington House.





The display will include standard 1820s to 1850s St. Louis-made hunting arms, as well as some of the rarest and fanciest in existence. These were made by J.P. Gemmer, a former employee of Sam Hawken turned successor. An excellent engineer, his guns benefited from advances in manufacturing technology that allowed consistently superior products. Note the Civil War surplus Spencer carbines he converted to fine sporting rifles.



In ascending order: big caliber S. Hawken plains rifle, small caliber Hawken squirrel rifle, Gemmer sporting rifle, St. Louis-made air rifle, modern copy of a pre-1849 J&S Hawken plains rifle made by R.V. Browner.



H.E. Dimick was a later competitor of Hawken who also made guns of exceptionally high quality. Many important specimens will be on display.

gunmakers to capture a slice of the market.

Hawken's quality was matched by some of their competitors. Johann P. Gemmer and Horace E. Dimick even exceeded Hawken, thanks to advances in manufacturing technology that allowed more consistently superior products to be made more efficiently. (Hawken rifles were, after all, handmade one at a time and each one was slightly different.) Gemmer, a former employee of Sam Hawken turned successor, was also an excellent and imaginative engineer. One of his niche specialties was converting Civil War surplus Spencer carbines into fine sporting rifles. Dimick was a later competitor to Hawken and couldn't catch up to, much less overtake, the Hawken rifle's established reputation in the marketplace.

The Sappington House exhibit includes many important guns from Hawken, Dimick, Gemmer and other St. Louis makers, as well as some plebeian but historically significant Northwest trade guns made specifically for bartering with the Indians. Available at bargain prices, they were often used by White settlers on a tight budget.

Upwards of \$1 million worth of antique arms, around 80 pieces, will be exhibited in three first-floor rooms of the Sappington House. In today's auction market, the sale prices of the more common, good original condition, solid Hawken plains rifles usually start at \$50,000.

The Sappington House is a historic structure that was moved from its original location in St. Louis County to the Boone Home park. The Sappington family was prominent in the development of St. Louis alongside the Chouteaus, Sublettes and other preeminent families of that time. The Sappington and Hawken families were actually united by marriage, so it's possible that this was not the first time that Hawken rifles have been present in the house.



The home of Nathan Boone, Daniel's son, was where the great frontiersman spent the last years of his life.



Period blacksmithing demonstrations are part of the weekend's educational program.



Participants in the event will don authentic clothing and gear. Visitors are welcome to do the same and jump into the historic time warp of the event.



Missouri State Representative Mazzie Boyd and historic artist Kyle Carroll holding a Hawken made by Bob Browner. She will be at the event Saturday to shoot the Browner Hawken and meet with attendees.



There's lots for kids and grownups to see and do. Here, a reenactor instructs youngsters how to start a fire old-school style.

in the country.

The Hawken Shop will set up a combination historic display and retail store in the village where you can inspect, and order, a contemporary Hawken rifle for yourself. If you are the DIY type, you'll find what you need to make your own Hawken from the many parts vendors in attendance. In the extensive outdoor sutler area on the central field, you'll find A Second Chance at History, Callahan Bag Molds, The Marquee Trading Company, Trail Creek Trade Company, Powder Horns and More, Mz T's Fiberworks, and many more companies offering all the 1820s to 1850s period accoutrements and clothing you need to equip yourself from head to toe like a mountain man from two centuries ago.

For as little as \$1, attendees can buy a raffle ticket for a chance to win one of the many 19th century rendezvous-worthy themed prizes, including a Head Lok throwing tomahawk from the Hawken Shop, handmade powder horn and shooting bag sets by Brad Dickinson and Mark Hasty, a bullet mold from Callahan Bag Molds, original art, and other quality prizes donated to support the event. You need not be present to win at the Saturday drawing, and tickets can be purchased online or onsite at the information tent.

In the realm of fine art, noteworthy is the planned attendance of the well known painter David Wright, recognized for the historic accuracy and detail of his early American themed work. He created *Taking the Long Shot* to promote the Hawken Classic and will sign prints and posters sold at the event, with proceeds going to support the NMLRA.

Missouri State legislator Mazzie Boyd, a pro-gun advocate, will be at the Hawken Classic on Saturday to meet her fellow Missourians and shoot a replica Hawken made by gunsmith Bob Browner. When historic artist Kyle Carroll proposed the idea of making the Hawken rifle the official Missouri State Firearm to Representative Boyd, she became the driving force behind it and got that legislation passed in the state house.

Take it from me, the 2023 Hawken Classic is too good to miss! ★

1825



2025

HAWKEN CLASSIC

Celebrating the 200th anniversary of the opening of the J&S Hawken Gun Shop in St. Louis, Missouri
Sponsored by the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association in collaboration with St. Charles County, Missouri

Taking the Long Shot, by painter David Wright, is available for sale as a commemorative poster or a print. The artist will be there to sign them.

2023 HAWKEN CLASSIC: WHEN & WHERE

Dates:

August 25-27, 2023

Location:

The Historic Daniel Boone Home
St. Charles County, 1868 Highway F
Defiance, Missouri 63341

Times:

Friday, August 25 – 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Saturday, August 26 – 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Sunday, August 27 – 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Other than service dogs, no animals are permitted on the event site.

Lodging options:

Nearby hotels include the Best Western in Washington, Missouri, and the Holiday Inn Express and Sleep Inn and Suites in O'Fallon, Missouri. Remember, even hotels in St. Louis are less than an hour away by car. Beyond the Trail RV Park is located in Defiance itself, only 10 minutes from the event. Cabin and tent camping at nearby Klondike Park offers a more rustic and inexpensive option, but reservations are advised.

Website:

gemmermuzzleloadingclub.com/hawken-classic

Facebook page: facebook.com/hawkenclassic

Email: hawkenclassic@nmlra.org

Future event dates:

September 27-29, 2024

September 26-28, 2025