

# A J&S Hawken Rifle



## J&S Hawken Rifles are Rare

by Bob Woodfill

There are few original, half-stocked J&S Hawken rifles in collections, probably because there were fewer in number made in comparison to the later S. Hawken rifles. I am defining J&S Hawken rifles as being made between 1825, the date of the Hawken brother's partnership, and 1849 when Jacob Hawken died. Sam Hawken continued making rifles until 1859 and stamped them *S. Hawken St. Louis*. Watt and Gemmer bought the Hawken shop in 1860, and Gemmer continued to stamp his rifles *S. Hawken St. Louis*. Gemmer still had several Hawken rifles in his inventory in 1894 (Kephart, 1924). The rifle under discussion was restored in the 1960s by the late T.K. Dawson (1930-1989), during which time I photographed and recorded its dimensions. This rifle has all of the features attributed to a J&S half-stocked Hawken rifle in one package.

Studying the details of an original, J&S half-stocked Hawken rifle, is not only a rare, but also a learning opportunity to compare and contrast its characteristic features with the later S. Hawken rifles—who's features are more well known. The reader is referred to John Baird's 1968 book on Hawken rifles for a broad outline of the major differences of the rifles during their evolutionary development at the Hawken shop.

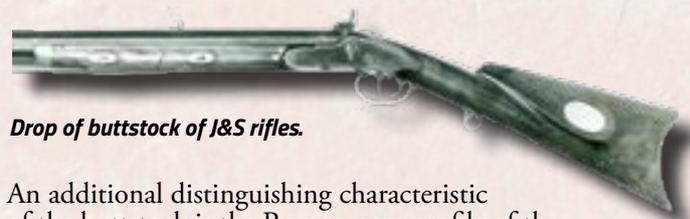
This rifle has the characteristic stock design of half-stocked



**Top of barrel views showing breech, hammer, barrel stamp and rear sight.**

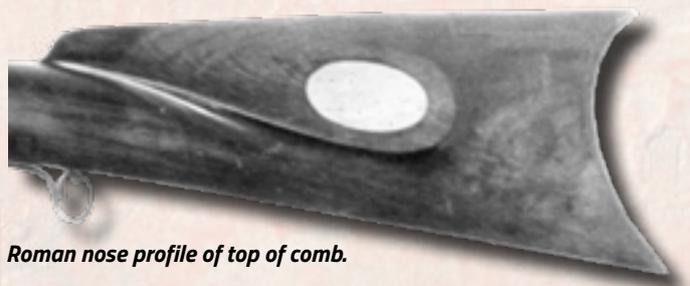
rifles made by Jake and Sam Hawken during the 1840s—including the famous Medina Hawken. The design consists of several easily identified features that persisted for over 10 years of Hawken shop production. In contrast, J&S Hawken rifles made during the 1830s, showed considerable stock variations before the 1840s stock design was finalized. First, the drop of the buttstock on 1840s J&S Hawken rifles is lower than that for later S. Hawken rifles. One can suggest that the larger drop of the buttstock was a carryover from the earlier Pennsylvania-Kentucky rifles, which both Jake and Sam had made earlier in their

careers. The drop was raised and the comb line is straight on S. Hawken rifles, possibly to help with the recoil of the larger calibers.



**Drop of buttstock of J&S rifles.**

An additional distinguishing characteristic of the buttstock is the Roman nose profile of the comb, again, a possible carryover from earlier Pennsylvania-Kentucky rifles. The cheekpiece is elliptical shaped with the bottom line of the cheekpiece terminating on top of the wrist. Sometimes the cheekpiece panel was beaded. An elliptical silver inlay about 2" long was commonly inlaid into the cheekpiece, and held in place with two small nails. Generally, this inlay was not engraved.



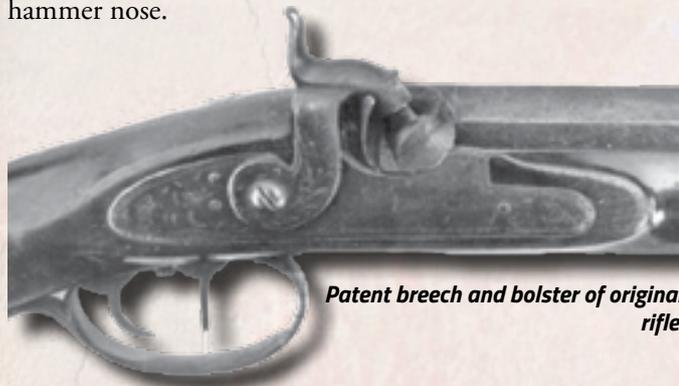
**Roman nose profile of top of comb.**

A two-piece buttplate with the extension about 3" long is welded to a crescent plate about 4 1/2" high with brass, sometimes showing at the joint. A 6" long by 3/4" wide, 3-screw toe plate completes the buttstock. All of these stock components were similar in 1840s rifles with only handmade variations. A greater uniformity of stock accessories is seen in S. Hawken rifles, and this may be attributed to the greater use of standardized commercial components.

The barrel of this rifle is heavy—even by Hawken standards. It tapers from 1 1/4" to 1 3/16" over its 32 13/16" length, thereby giving a relatively heavy 13 pound rifle. Most of the S. Hawken barrels tapered from about 1 1/8"

maximum to 1" at the muzzle over a 36" length. I can only speculate that the Hawken brothers were cautious about one of their customers double charging a barrel thereby causing it to blow up.

The bolster on this rifle is similar to the bolster on the Medina, and other Hawken rifles of the 1840 period. The hooked, patented breech is vertical and not slanted as were those used on later S. Hawken rifles. The lock is marked with the name Goucher in a banner under the bolster. The hammer also has some light cast-in engraving with the standard cutout for the spent caps in the front of the hammer nose.



*Patent breech and bolster of original rifle.*

A magnificent oval-shaped, bottom-opening patchbox measuring 2 1/4" high by 4 3/8" long, highlights this J&S Hawken rifle. Some of the earliest J&S Hawken rifles had patchboxes with side plates. Engraved on the lid of this patchbox is a fierce-looking animal believed to be an American wapiti or elk. In the 1840s, before cameras became available, engravers had to rely on their imagination combined with stories from western explorers for the descriptions of animals encountered in the American West.



*Engraved patchbox and buttplate of original rifle.*

The lock panels on J&S Hawken rifles were larger in proportion to S. Hawken panels, with the front end rounded and the rear end terminating in a square finial. S. Hawken rifle lock panels are smaller and terminate in a double-pointed pattern. These large, square lock panels on J&S Hawken rifles of the 1840s are often seen on Pennsylvania-Kentucky rifles, and again, may be a carryover.



*Lock panels of original rifle.*

Four elliptical shaped barrel key escutcheons about 1 1/4" long and of silver composition, are held in place with small nails. The heads of the barrel keys are square compared to the oval heads of the later S. Hawken rifles. A pewter nose cap finishes off the forearm of this J&S Hawken rifle. Generally, S. Hawken rifles have nose caps made of sheet steel. The rear entry thimble is held in place with two pins on J&S Hawken rifles, while only one pin was used on S. Hawken rifles.



*Barrel key escutcheon, poured nose cap and rear thimble of original rifle.*

### *Replica Copy*

You can make a copy of this original J&S half-stocked Hawken rifle, or a composite of half-stocked rifles made during the 1840s by the Hawken shop. Suitable parts are available from suppliers, except for the vertical, hooked patented breech plug and tang which you will have to build.



*Right-side of copy.*

**Wood**—I shaped my stock from a blank of spectacular, burl American walnut obtained from Johnson Wood Products, Strawberry Point, IA. When working with highly figured American walnut blanks, you need to be extremely careful to follow the grain, so as not to produce any unwanted gouges and tears in the wood. After the rifle was finished, I antiqued the wood and metal parts.



*Burl, American walnut stock blank used to build copy rifle.*

**Barrel and Breech**—Years ago, Bill Large (1907-1985) supplied me with a 1 1/16" tapered, .54-caliber barrel, with an early J&S Hawken, vertical, patented hooked-

*(Continued on page 60)*

breech of his liking. Now, anyone who dealt with Bill knows that you didn't always get what you ordered! Bill would often take it upon himself to send you, "what you need, or what you really wanted!", whether it be caliber, length/taper of barrel or style of breech. The style of patented breech that I was wanting was similar to the Medina patented breech. Bill simply supplied me with a blank, over-sized bolster with lots of extra metal. This reminded me of a comment from an elderly female cook at one of my elk camps in Montana. One morning, a dude client complained about the burnt toast. She growled back, "Scrape it to the color you want!" Well, that is what I did, producing a Medina-looking bolster. The reader will have to modify one of the modern, slanted hooked-breeches to the vertical position for absolute authenticity. My finished rifle weighs 11 1/4 pounds. I would suggest using a 32" long, 1 1/8"

**Patchbox**—You will have to fashion a patchbox and hinge from 0.050" thick steel, and the latch and opening spring from spring steel. Mike Yazel did a masterful job engraving the elk-looking animal on the patchbox lid for me.



*Patchbox with elk engraving.*

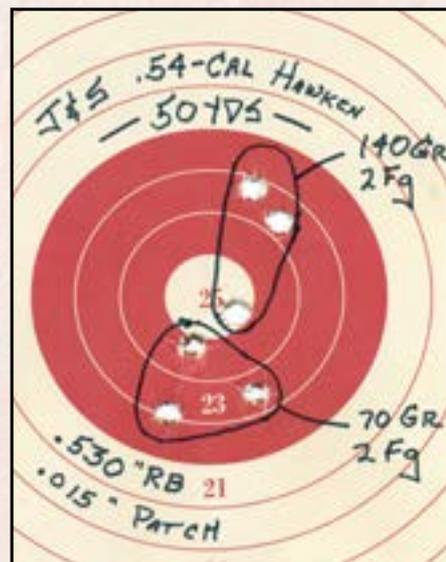


*Left-side of copy.*

diameter, straight-taper barrel in either .50 or .54-caliber to mimic a 1840s J&S Hawken rifle's balance and styling.

**Fittings**—Today's suppliers can provide close-to-wrist trigger guards and early turn-down J&S Hawken rifle buttplates. I modified a set of Davis double-set triggers and lock to match the J&S originals. A 7/16" diameter ramrod, thimbles, front and rear sights of the period are available from Track-of-the-Wolf ([www.trackofthewolf.com](http://www.trackofthewolf.com).) You will need to pour and shape a nose cap of pewter which Track-of-the-Wolf can also supply. Make a 3/4" wide by 6" long toeplate from 1/16" thick mild steel, and fasten it with three screws. The silver inlays for the barrel key holders and cheekpiece are available from Tedd Cash ([www.tdcmsg.com](http://www.tdcmsg.com).) Remember to attach the rear entry thimble with two pins as was done on all J&S Hawken rifles.

**Testing**—The J&S Hawken replica copy was fired across a chronograph with a hunting load of 140-grains of GOEX 2Fg black powder, Hornady 0.530" diameter round balls and 0.015" thick patches lubed with Wonder Lube. The velocity registered 1694 fps. A half-charge load of 70-grains of GOEX 2Fg black powder recorded 1256 fps, and showed 1" groups at 50 yards which would be useful for general plinking and target work with less recoil. In general, the hunting load of 140-grains of GOEX will be +3" at 50 yards, +3" at 100 yards, zero at 125 yards and -24" at 200 yards.



*Target shot at 50 yards.*



*Pewter nose cap and rear thimble.*



### *Bibliography*

Baird, John D. *Hawken Rifles, the Mountain Man's Choice*, Pence, IN, 1968.  
Kephart, Horace. "The Hawken Rifle." *American Rifleman*, April 1924. MB