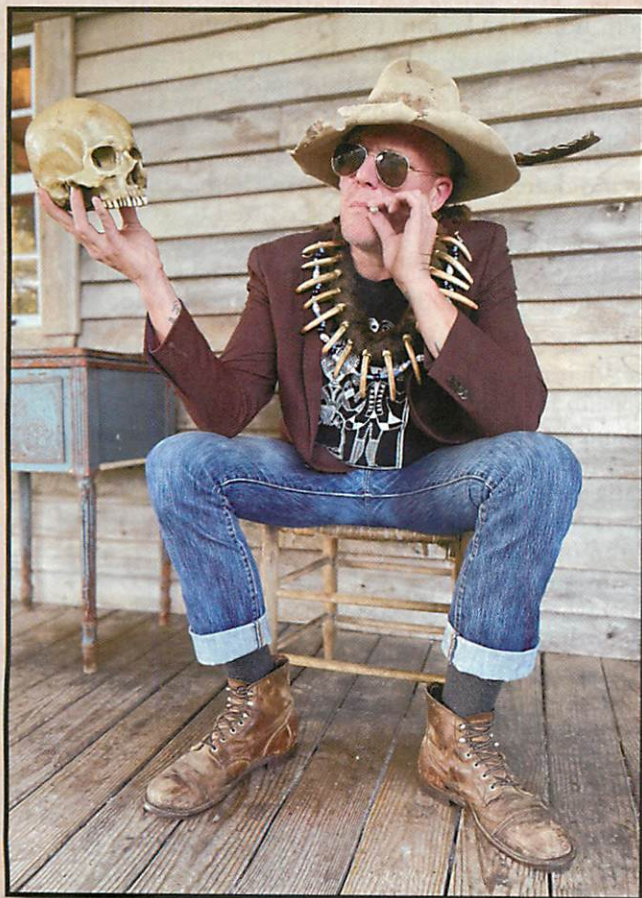


Artists of the Contemporary Longrifle Culture

The Frontier Folk Art of Matthew Fennewald

by Andrew Scott Wills



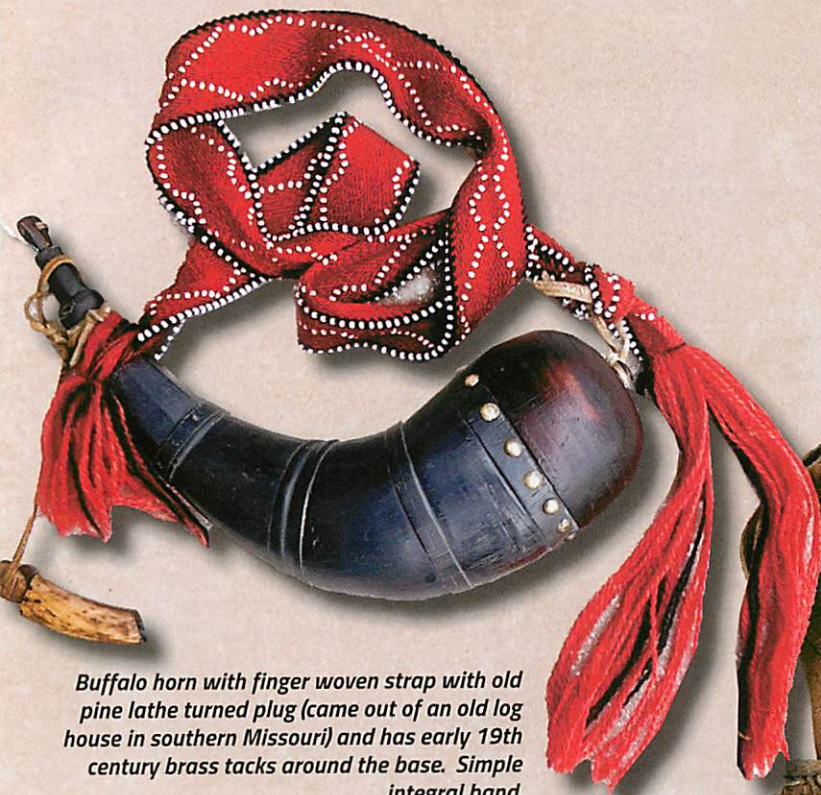
Every artist has a unique fingerprint that shines through their work, a central message that cuts through. Some more than others. When you lay your eyes on the creations of Matthew Fennewald you are immediately transported to another era. The authenticity is carried through to an extreme level that few artists would justify or a casual observer would appreciate. But like with all masterpieces, there is a long and winding backstory that led to its creation. Fennewald has a remarkable one and it started back as a young boy.

“As long as I can remember, I have loved to draw and make stuff,” says Matthew who grew up bouncing around the Midwest before his family settled in Missouri when he was nine years old.

Having a gift is one thing, having the tools and resources to take that gift to the next level is another altogether. Matthew was fortunate to have a father who was willing to throw logs on the fire of his interests.

“I was lucky. My Dad had a woodshop, blacksmith shop and I kind of dabbled in leather work my whole life. I had access to all that stuff.”

The big moment that truly charted the course of his life was when his Dad took him and his brother to *Feast of the Hunter's Moon* in the early 90s. The historical reenactment has been held in October since 1968, at the present-day site of Fort Ouiatenon, a replica 18th century French military and trading post near West Lafayette, Indiana. Matthew was blown away by the experience. The period dress and the living history



Buffalo horn with finger woven strap with old pine lathe turned plug (came out of an old log house in southern Missouri) and has early 19th century brass tacks around the base. Simple integral band.

portrayals gripped him and he immediately knew that's what he wanted to do.

And so that Christmas his Dad gave him the first three volumes of the *Book of Buckskinning* by William H. Scurlock. Matthew dove into the pages. Two years later Michael Mann's blockbuster movie *The Last of the Mohicans* was released.

And like the bellows of a frontier forge, each experience fanned the fire.

Matthew began working on his own kit. He started building powder horns, shooting bags and clothing. At thirteen he tried his hand at tanning hides. He admits that he didn't really get the knack for it until after high school when he embarked on an incredible journey.

"When I was 20ish I dropped out of college to live out my "My Side of the Mountain" and "The Hatcher" fantasies."

He and his girlfriend at the time took off hitchhiking across the country living out of backpacks and off the land. They roamed the mountains and rivers by foot and by jon boat, trapping and foraging for food along the way. He wanted to truly experience what people on the frontier experienced, not just for a weekend, but for an extended period. They lived off the land this way for nearly four life-changing years. It was an adventure that few would have had the guts to take on. But something happened that snapped him back to the 21st century.

"By the tail end of that chapter of life we were living in a wigwam and my girlfriend got pregnant with my oldest son and so back to modern life we went," Fennewald says. "That part of my life has definitely had a huge impact on how I approach what I make, and really just my life in general."

That holistic, hands-in-the-dirt way of life left a profound mark. He not only grew more passionate about his art but



Heart bag - bark tan deer hide, sewn with linen thread. The back has a sheath that holds an old butcher knife rehanded with an antler crown piece. Antler measure and a castor bottle made from Buffalo horn are attached to the strap. This rig for the "Missouri Hunters" display that was at the CLA show in 2016.

also about the process of making the mediums for his art. Yes you can buy tanned leather and you can buy wooden dowels for arrow shafts but he was drawn deeper into the process.

"Back in the day I was full-time employed brain tanning deer hides and then making bags. I was cranking out 100 to 200 bags a year," he says. "If it's something I made with leather there's a 99% chance I tanned the leather myself."

Leather tanning has become a signature component that sets Fennewald's work apart. He likes to be involved from the beginning. Early on all of his leather came from his own

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hunting and trapping. Nowadays he supplements with other sources whether from deer processors or other trappers but he insists on fleshing and tanning the hides himself.

He also spends a lot of time with wood. He loves hand carving wooden figures, spoons, war clubs and pipes. But admits he does quite a bit of leather work as well from moccasins, shooting bags to clothing.

But the most noticeable aspect of Matthew's work is that there are seldom any repeats. Powder horns remain one of the few items he continues to produce, but unsurprisingly, each one has its own unique interpretation.

"I hate to do the same thing over and over," Matthew laughs. His artistic strength is doing something new and innovative. This has led to shifting away from commissions and leaning into following what inspires him and then making it available for sale. This system takes the pressure of a deadline off his shoulders and encourages his best work.

Fennewald is influenced by many original and modern makers. He has a large resource library and frequently visits museums and trade shows to lay his eyes on original pieces. He loves to get his camera lens on as many originals as possible so that he can reference them later.

Another big experience that both influenced his art and taught him more practical skills was the opportunity to work in art conversation. He got to work on restoring and preserving murals with a world class art conservator. He learned how to remove grime without removing the patina which is a skill that he uses to this day.

In 2016, a huge opportunity presented itself and it helped Matthew take a step up. He was granted a folk art scholarship by the Missouri Arts Council to study under brilliant Missouri-based horner Jeff Bottiger. The apprenticeship was invaluable. Bottiger trained him on every aspect of powder

horn making but it was the process of patina and antiquing that really took Fennewald's art to another level.

"The state paid him to take me on as an apprentice. I would travel to his house once a week and he taught me so, so much. It helped propel me to another whole level."

While powder horns have become one of his cornerstone talents, 41-year old Fennewald can't be pinned down as just a horner. His list of projects is ever-growing and there is seemingly nothing he's not willing to take on.

I visited Matthew's booth at the 2023 Contemporary Longrifle Association show and was able to see several items in person. I was blown away. Let me run through some of my favorites.

An impressive item that caught my eye right away was his Native American-inspired hickory self bow, quiver and arrows.

"It's sort of my take on what an 18th century to early 19th century lower Missouri River valley or Central Mississippi Valley rig might have looked like."

The bow is a simple hickory self bow in the classic D shape tiller. It has a heat treated belly, diamond shape knocks, 60 1/2 inches nock to nock and pulls 50 lbs at 26 inches.



Wooden guy with a mule - aka "Trappers Sweetheart" - a folk art sculpture piece where I was trying to capture/convey the affection between a guy and his animal. It's cherry wood all hand carved, with brain tan for the guys hood and the halter, wool flannel for the saddle blanket and linen for the packs.



Left: Wooden horned deity thing - aka "The Manitaue" - a folk art nod to the manitaues of legend. Buffalo horn horns, and cherry wood. Brass wire necklace, and ochre and charcoal painted braintan deer "robe" Right: Wooden Indian - all pine wood hand carved with deer hair for his roach, hickory bow with a sinew bow string, glass wampum necklace, and a linen match coat.

The quiver is made of two braintan otter hides, one whole hide for the body and then the other one being the strap and fringe. It also uses a brain tan buffalo that was painted with ochre for the mouth plug. It's all sewn with deer sinew. It also features brass buttons for the eyes and silk ribbon and brass dangles hanging from the mouth plug.

The arrows are crafted from Missouri valley river cane with hickory foreshafts. They are fletched with wild turkey wing feathers. Notably, they feature just a two feather fletch. This is due to Matthew's research of 18th century original examples which indicates that a two-feather fletch was incredibly more common than a three-feather fletch. The arrows also have deer sinew wraps, and are ochre painted. They also have brass points which are based on regional archeological examples. Matthew theorizes that tribes were cutting up brass kettles to make them.

Not all of Matthew's work is inspired purely from historical artifacts. Some things are simply a creative inspiration or a wild hair offshoot of his research. Take for instance his impressive folk art piece called "*The Saga of the Longknife*" or what his kids lovingly dubbed "Wilber". The collaborative project was the brainchild of Fennewald for the Contemporary Longrifle Association live auction.

"Basically I had this vision of almost like a folk art, cigar store Indian statue but with an NC Wyeth aesthetic of a classic frontiersman," Matthew explains. "The type that's sort of just myth and not too factual, sort of a fantasy backwoods man vibe."

And that's exactly the impression it gives. The piece is roughly 4 feet tall and features a kneeling frontiersman as if in the middle of a hunt or maybe hiding from a potential threat. You even may get the feeling that Wilber could stand up at any moment and start reloading his trusty flintlock. From his face to his feet he has an eerie life-like presence about him. And there is a reason for that: Fennewald traced his 8-year old daughter for all the body pieces.

The whole project took three months to make. Wilber's head and torso are carved from pecan wood with cherry and walnut limbs. The eyes are deer bone with

18th century nails holding them on. The coat was made from an old handwoven blanket and his legs have deer hide leggings protecting them. An old silk scarf piece became his neck cloth.

For the collaboration he called in some of the best makers he knew. His dad, Paul Fennewald, made the base that the frontiersman crouches on, Alec Fourman made his moccasins, Simeon England made his tomahawk, Eric Ewing made his shooting bag, Tad Frei made his powder horn, Michael Agee his beaver felt hat, Josh Weismann made his rifle, Sam Hall made him a powder measure and Todd Dagget his knife and sheath. Interestingly, the sheath was made from leftover buffalo hide from a five-day "no food or fire kits" survival trip where the group hauled raw buffalo hides down to the creek, built bullboats from them and floated for miles living off of trapping beaver.

One of the coolest aspects of "*The Saga of the Longknife*" is, although he may not be real, his clothes, rifle and all his accouterments are all quite real.

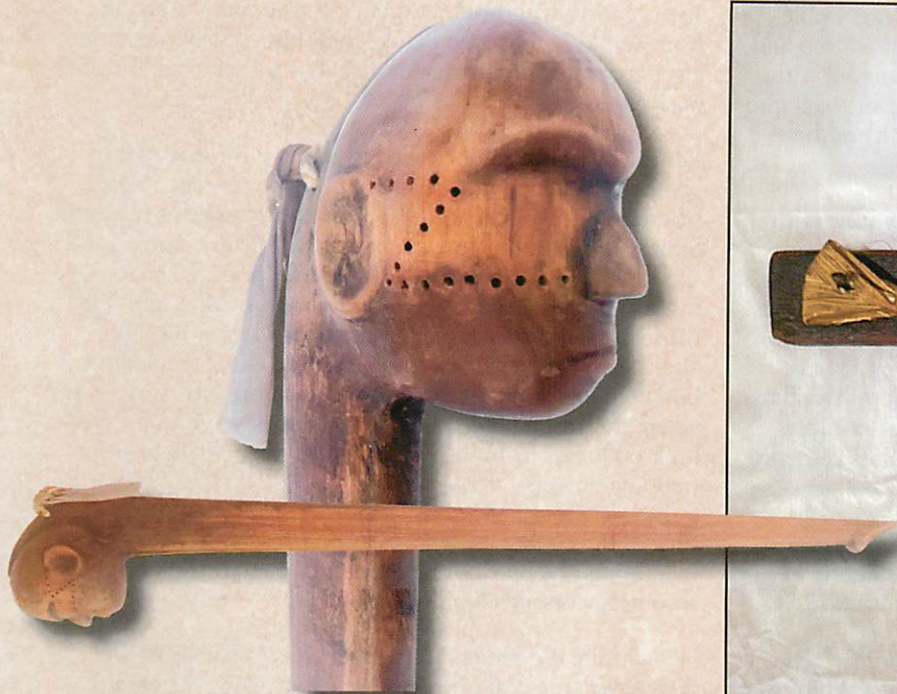
"It's all fully functional," Matthew says. And so if Wilber ever does have a magical Pinocchio transformation, he would be equipped to head off on a long hunt in the Kentucky frontier or push up stream with the Corps of Discovery.



Powder horn - cow horn with a walnut base done in classic French and Indian war style. This horn was the final project I did as an apprentice to Jeff Bottiger with the Missouri Folk Arts program.

Brain tan hunting pouch with Buffalo horn with finger woven strap.

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War club – cherry wood with effigy face club, silk ribbon and deer hide "hair ornament", and ochre painted. It's based loosely on an Osage dance club that's in the Penn Museum.

"I'm forever grateful that so many guys, whose work I admire, were willing to take an idea I had and run with it for zero gains."

Another eye-catching item is a black buffalo powder horn. At first glance the horn appears to be an original and that is because of the extent that Matthew takes his aging. He used a 1790's pine beam to make the base plug which came out of an old log house in southern Missouri. It also has early 19th century brass tacks around the base. Using period original components really makes you squint when trying to date the horn. Current owner Doran Carr fitted the horn with a gorgeous hand woven red strap.

Fennwald has made several warclubs over the years but the first one he ever made was in 2008 when he loosely based one on an Osage dance club that is part of the Smithsonian collection. It's carved from cherry wood and ochre and has a silk ribbon and brain tanned "scalplock".

One of my favorite pieces is a hand carved figure called *Trapper Sweetheart* of a black mountain man petting the muzzle of his mule. Fennwald wanted to shine a light on the importance of the relationship he imagines a lot of the mountain men had with their horse. As noted in many trapper journals, a mountain man without a horse was in a tight spot.

"I had just read this book about Jim Beckwourth. It was a bunch of lies he told but it's still such a great book," he laughs. "And I thought it would be a cool visual art concept to convey the affection some of these guys had between them and their animals. I grew up around mules, my Dad always raised mules.

Another piece he calls "Cornhusk Messiah" is a mesmerizing crucifix that's impossible not to stop and stare at. It's made of patinated cornhusks and buffalo wool for the hair and beard.



Corn husk crucifix- aka "Corn husk Messiah" - the cross is cherry wood with "inri" carved into it and a brass wire wrap at the top. The Jesus figure is corn husk with Buffalo wool hair and beard and antique glass bead eyes. He's nailed on with old nails that came out of a 1790s log house.

He used antique glass beads for the eyes and cherry wood for the cross with INRI carved into the top. Brass wire and antique hand-forged nails are holding him onto the cross. Matthew called it a folk art take on life and death and the salvation theme.

Matthew's art is truly American folk art. It's firmly grounded in American and Native American history down to the extent that will go unseen by a casual observer. It carries on the tradition, culture and folklore of our heritage while also making its own humble mark.

We often hear the word "maker" thrown around. There are certainly makers and then there are artist-makers. Matthew Fennwald is an artist-maker who creates truly functional art. So while completely usable, it also appears to be something that belongs in the Smithsonian or the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. This level of work is not only credited to a God-given talent but also his obsessive research and years of practical experience in the field.

His creative disposition doesn't end at the workbench. Even when portraying a living history role at a *Rendezvous*, whether a frontiersman or a native warrior, he sees it as just another



Fawn flap bag. The bag is unlined brain tan deer hide, sewn with linen thread and has a brain tan fawn hide flap.

form of art. He loves getting his kids involved and you can often find his sons Gus and Kai at various events as well.

“To me, the epitome of it all is you make yourself the canvas,” Matthew explains. He has become well-known for his historically accurate portrayals of a Native American warrior.

When it comes to being an artist, it doesn't matter if they are stroking a brush, carving wood or writing a song, behind every piece there is an underlying message they are trying to deliver. It is no different with Matthew Fennewald.

“I hope people know that I'm trying to tell a story with my art.”

You can see Matthew Fennewald's work in person at various makers' shows such as the Contemporary Longrifle Association where I had the chance to meet him. You can also follow him on Instagram at the handle [@always_feral_folkart](#) where he posts his various works as they become available. He also posts a lot about his living history and survival trips.

If you would like to add one of Matthew Fennewald's pieces to your collection you can reach him at m.fennewald@hotmail.com or 573-418-2088. MB



Bow, arrows, and quiver set - made of two braintan otter hides total in the quiver and brain tan Buffalo that was painted with ochre for the mouth plug. Sewn with deer sinew. Brass buttons for the eyes and silk ribbon and brass dangles decoration hanging from the mouth plug also. The arrows are river cane with hickory foreshafts, two feather wild Turkey wing fletch, deer sinew wraps, ochre painted, and brass points The bow is just a simple hickory self bow, in the classic D shape tiller, heat treated belly, diamond shape knocks, 60 1/2" nock to nock, and pulls 50 lbs @ 26"