

Closing the Circle

Johann Philipp Gemmer and the Hawken Company

by Matthias Recktenwald

(adapted from the article originally published in *Visier*;
translated from the German by Eric A. Bye.

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St. Louis, Missouri: The Gemmer-Hawken Shop on 3rd Street near the Eads Bridge; built in 1874, at that time it was the longest bridge in the world. Far left: Johann Philipp Gemmer, from the Taunus area in Germany, was in charge of the Hawken Shop in Missouri for over 50 years. In his private life he was a family man and a passionate gardener. Center: Lars Gemmer wanted a special muzzleloader and thereby triggered the research into J.P. Gemmer.

How a German immigrant came to be in charge of the most famous gun shop in the Wild West and how his trail was re-discovered in the mists of history

Long ago a man moved from the forests of Germany to the great river of North America to work as a gunsmith. A century and a half later a young man in Germany discovered his flair for shooting muzzleloaders: two members of one family – and a circle closed.

Starting in 1996 I encountered the name *Gemmer* in several contexts here in Germany. That was also the family name of the US gunsmith John Phillip Gemmer (1838-1919). He was a man of some stature: in the 1860s he took over the famed Hawken Shop and was in charge of it up to the 20th century. In addition Gemmer secured his place in firearms history through the type of modification and tuning then known as “sporterizing.” To add fuel to the fire, about that time the Italian manufacturer Davide Pedersoli introduced a falling block rifle based on the 1874 Sharps with the designation *Gemmer Sharps*.

Because of all this I was getting fidgety: was this a random similarity in names, or were the Gemmers from Germany related to the Gemmer of the Wild West? Initial research led nowhere, except for a comment from an elderly restaurant patron: “Somewhere in the Taunus or the Westerwald there is a church in which there is a plaque for the bells that a rich Yankee had donated.” What American? What church? What town? These questions remained unanswered. Partly because I was new in the area and still didn’t know anyone.

Three years later, in doing some other research, came the first progress: In the John Baird book *Hawken Rifles – the Mountain Man’s Choice* there was a note about an article printed in several US periodicals, “...written by Julius H.P. Gemmer, the son of John Philip Gemmer. In the article Julius Gemmer announced that circumstance that his father had been born in Nassau, Germany. His parents were William and Maria Gemmer.” There it was: the long-sought proof. The similarity in names among the Gemmers was no coincidence.

The next progress came from Horst Friedrich in Singhofen: a policeman by profession, he is a gun collector in his free time and a well-known historian of police work and regional history, plus he’s an author for *Visier*. After a week of investigation he discovered the origin of the Gemmer family in the town of Rettert. So I visited the church there, climbed over the pews to the organ, and found the plaque with the dates of Johann P.

Gemmer’s life. His children had donated the bells, which were confiscated during the Second World War as a “strategic commodity” and melted down.

Then nothing happened for a long time. Until I spoke to the man who was to give the matter the decisive push – NMLRA member Helmut Mohr. He lives and breathes black powder and muzzleloaders and has won umpteen championships (including the German muzzleloading championship in Pforzheim in 2009 – at the age of 69). In addition, Mohr builds wonderful



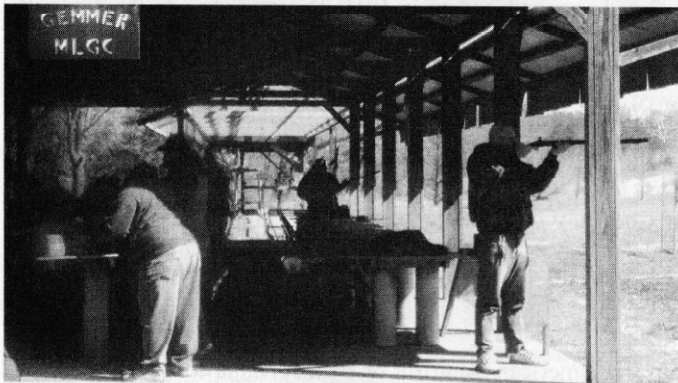
[top] Helmut Mohr’s *Schuetzen* rifle – with palm rest, adjustable diopter, and maple stock à la Hawken-Gemmer – fastened with two barrel keys. [center] On-site inspection in Rettert, Germany; from left, Lars Gemmer, Mayor Harald Gemmer, gunmaker Helmut Mohr, Klaus Gemmer and Visier Editor and author Matthias Recktenwald. The plaque with the dates of J.P. Gemmer’s birth and death hangs in the organ loft. [lower left] Visier writer Horst Friedrich located the church and the plaque.

muzzleloaders based on historic patterns, and with the Mohr Schuetzen rifle he created a unique, distinctive target rifle in 19th-century style. Another of his interests is the question of how much German gunsmiths influenced the US gun market. The Gemmer story had reached the right man.

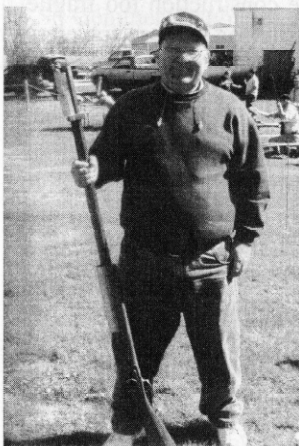
All good things take time – including this. At the end of 2008 Helmut Mohr called and said in his difficult dialect, “*Listen, Recktenwald, I have something to tell you.*” A young man had bought a tuned-up muzzleloader from him. That was noteworthy in itself because not many young people over here shoot black powder. The young man came back on another day and ordered a Schuetzen rifle. Mohr: “*I will be happy to make it for you, but tell me your name and address.*” Thereupon the young man said, “*My name is Lars Gemmer and I am from the Nassau area.*”

As Mohr told it, “*all the alarm bells went off.*” Naturally he took on the assignment with more devotion than usual. He coached Gemmer in shooting and asked if he was related to J.P. Gemmer. When Lars Gemmer found out about his history he mobilized another Gemmer – with the first name Gerhard, and also an accomplished genealogist. He prepared a Gemmer family tree. According to it, both J.P. Gemmer and Lars Gemmer were descended from the oldest known bearer of this name: Ambrosius “Brosman” Gemmer (ca. 1611-74).

In the meantime Mohr had met someone in the muzzleloading Mecca of Friendship, Indiana: “*When I turned around after shooting a match, several US friends were standing there, and they all were wearing caps with the inscription “Gemmer Muzzle Loading Gun Club, St. Louis. This shows that the name has not*



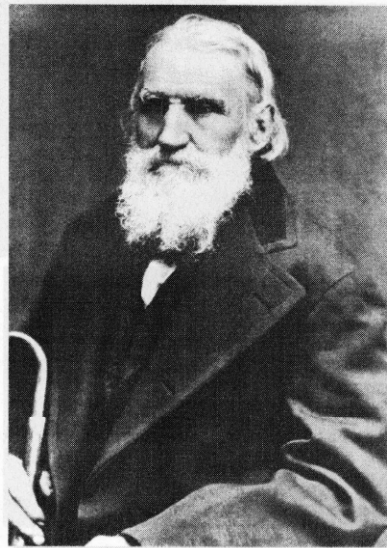
The Gemmer ML Gun Club. A gun club of true muzzleloading aficionados in St. Louis recalls the famous son of the city.



The man with the sturdy benchrest muzzleloading rifle is Walter Fett – he took and supplied many photos from the US.

been forgotten.” One of the shooters is named Walter Fett; he too played a role in this story. At Mohr’s request Fett got together photos of rifles from Gemmer’s workshop, of the Gemmer-Hawken shop, and of J.P. Gemmer himself.

Now it was possible to research the fate of Gemmer, for which Horst Friedrich and Gerhard Gemmer had done some preliminary work. This showed that Johann Philipp Gemmer was born in Lollschied, Germany in 1838, the son of Heinrich Wilhelm Gemmer and Maria Christine, née May. The family moved to Rettert and lived there until Maria Gemmer died. At that time many



Samuel Hawken – he and his brother Jacob made the muzzleloading rifles known as Plains Rifles or Rocky Mountain Rifles.

gan Boone, two sons of Daniel Boone, the most important woods runner of the 18th century and the model for Natty Bumppo, the Leatherstocking in the novels of James Fennimore Cooper. In Boonville Gemmer spent four years learning the gunmaker’s trade. At the age of twenty-one in 1859, Gemmer went to St. Louis, where he worked in the shop of Emanuel Kleinhenn. In 1860 he changed to William Watt – in the Hawken firm (see box).

Jacob Hawken, one of the two shop founders, had died eleven years earlier, and Sam Hawken had recently moved to Colorado. This posed a puzzle for historians, for the ownership issue in each phase has not been entirely clear. It appears that around 1858-59 Sam Hawken turned over the shop in St. Louis to his son William S. Hawken and his occasional partner Tristan Campbell, and Hawken junior moved to be with the father. Then the boss of the shop in St. Louis was William L. Watt. Gemmer asked him for a job.

According to the article mentioned by Gemmer’s son Julius, the now Americanized John Philip took over

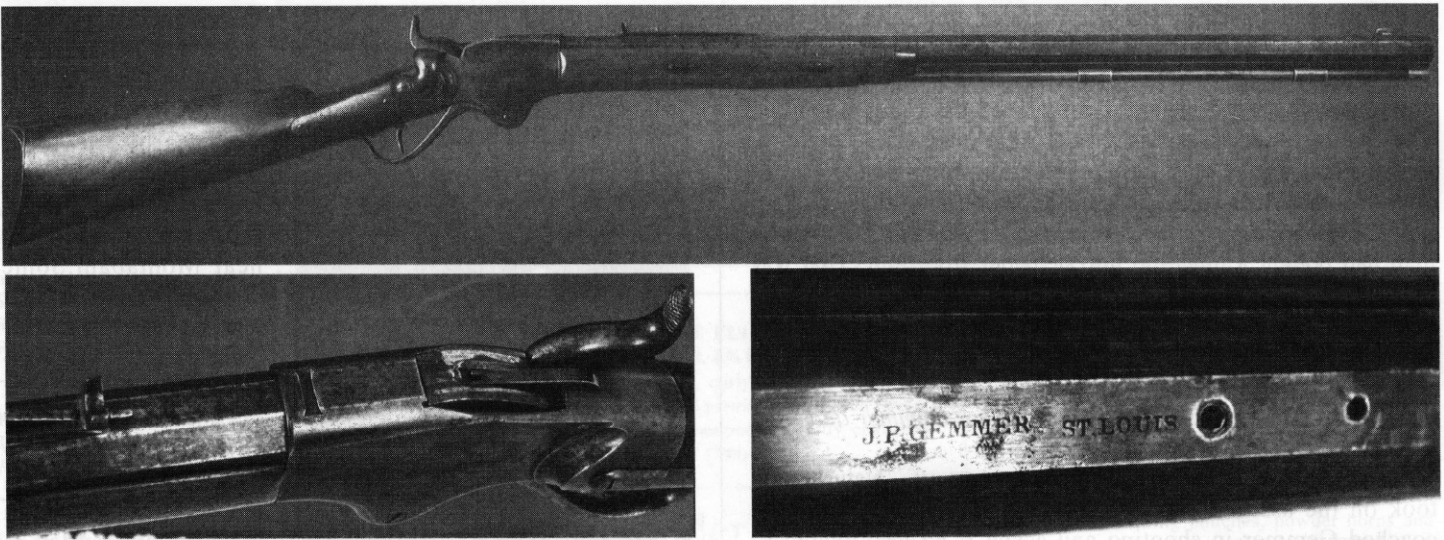
Germans were going to America. As Gerhard Gemmer related, in 1853 all the inhabitants of the nearby town of Niederfischbach moved to the New World; so did those of Sespentroth near Montabaur. Some Gemmers also sought their luck there. The widower and his son traveled to the US in 1855: by sailing ship to New Orleans, then by steamboat up the Mississippi River. They got off in Missouri and settled in Boonville – named after Nathan and Daniel Mor-



Thomas Tate Tobin (1823-1904) with his plains rifle. He was a trapper, scout, and bounty hunter.



Sam Hawken’s grave in the Bellefontaine Cemetery in Saint Louis – the headstone bears the appropriate image of a plains rifle.



A Gemmer-Spencer repeater, .56-52 caliber with 30-inch barrel. This one bears Gemmer's name; the stock with the buttplate follows the Hawken pattern. Owner Gregory S. Grimes: "These are very rare rifles. As far as I know, there are only 12 to 15 pieces remaining. Because of its workmanship and its condition, this is one of the five best. Good barrel, good screws, and a crisp sounding action." Photos: Trail Creek Trade Co.

Band of Brothers: Hawken

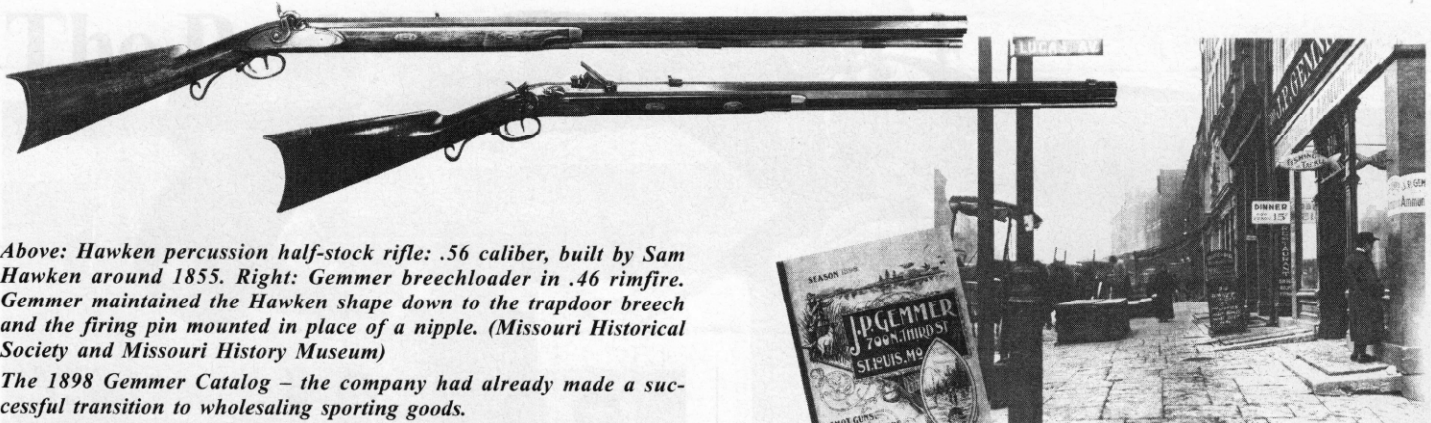
This was the name of the firm whose single-shot muzzleloading rifles were the first typical guns of the West for nearly fifty years, from the dawn of the fur trade era through the first years after the Civil War. According to a letter from their descendent Carl J. Hawken, the Maryland-born brothers Jacob and Samuel Hawken were descended from the Swiss gun maker Nic(o)laus Hacken; he was born in 1565 in Rueggisberg/Bern. In 1750 the three Hacken/Hawken brothers went to America. Like their father Christian, the Hawken Brothers George, John, Jacob, Samuel, and William learned the gun maker's trade, but only two of the five achieved fame on the prairies. Jacob Hawken (1783-1849) was the first to move to St. Louis, Missouri, the gateway to the West. But scholars disagree over the year: according to legend he was in St. Louis in 1807 and opened his shop in 1815. But according to the research of the trapper- and Hawken guru Charles E. Hanson, Jr. in *The Hawken Rifle - its Place in History* he was working at Harper's Ferry Arsenal in (now) West Virginia around 1808-1818. According to Hanson, Jacob founded his shop in Missouri around 1821. In 1822 his brother Samuel (1796-1884) moved in with him. The Hawkens owed their fame to three factors:

1) The Rocky Mountain trappers: in 1822 William Ashley (1778-1838) founded the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (RMFC) and ordered a rifle built to his specifications from Hawken in 1823 – the earliest reference to this type of rifle. He may have also outfitted his trappers, known as "Ashley's Hundred," with Hawkens. But the first reference to standard Hawkens came from the RMFC's competition: in 1831 John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company ordered eighteen rifles. Trappers and scouts such as Kit Carson, Tom Tobin, and Jim Bridger, as well as Mariano Modena also carried such rifles.

2) The British author and adventurer George Frederick Ruxton (1821-48). His posthumously published bestseller *Life in the Far West* proclaimed to the world in 1849 that Hawken rifles were celebrated among the trappers (who of course also carried guns of many other makers).

3) The Hawken concept. The brothers developed their rifles from the American longrifle or Pennsylvania longrifle – incorrectly but popularly known as the Kentucky longrifle. This family of slender, long, and comparatively small-caliber rifles was in turn based on the German Jaeger rifle. Like other gunmakers, the Hawkens knew that these long, thin rifles were suitable for the eastern forests, but not for the prairies and mountains in the West. The caliber was too small, the construction too fragile, and the decoration of brass and silver too conspicuous. So in several steps they developed a hardy rifle for western travelers: shorter than a longrifle, with no embellishment, and non-reflective fittings of browned steel. In addition the barrels were not pinned, as with longrifles. Instead two keys held the stock and the barrel together, which made it easy to take apart and put together even in the prairie expanses. When longrifles carried on horseback took a fall they easily broke at the wrist, but this was less common with Hawkens. The reason: the masters in St. Louis reinforced this part. Under the stock they lengthened the trigger plate, and on the top, the breech plug tang, and bound the two parts together with bolts passing through the stock. In addition the Hawkens enlarged the caliber – commonly between .50 and .53. In order to reduce the consequent recoil and increase the weight forward, the rifles came with a steel rib mounted under the octagonal barrel. The barrels, which were at least an inch across the flats, were made from low-stress, unhardened forged steel. This, the shallow, wide grooves, and the slow twist allowed the barrels to digest heavy loads and withstand even fairly large overloads. This was of some importance in the scramble of a battle with hostile Indians or competing trappers – for sometimes more or less powder made it into the bore. These rifles were heavy at nine to eleven pounds. In later years, during the time of transition from Hawken to William L. Watt and then J.P. Gemmer, the rifles became even heavier – in individual cases up to twenty-two pounds and .60 caliber.

The story of the Hawken-Gemmer firm is not over: in the 1960s Hawken fan Art Ressel purchased what was left of the shop. He reopened the shop and up through the 1980s produced around 300 Hawken rifles in the old way. Then there was a break of several years until Greg Roberts and Claudette Green purchased Ressel's business in 1990 and moved it from St. Louis, Missouri to Oak Harbor, Washington – where it stands today and is called "The Hawken Shop."



Above: Hawken percussion half-stock rifle: .56 caliber, built by Sam Hawken around 1855. Right: Gemmer breechloader in .46 rimfire. Gemmer maintained the Hawken shape down to the trapdoor breech and the firing pin mounted in place of a nipple. (Missouri Historical Society and Missouri History Museum)

The 1898 Gemmer Catalog – the company had already made a successful transition to wholesaling sporting goods.

Some things never change: Even around 1900 young boys were interested in guns and fishing – as this fellow demonstrates by gazing on J.P. Gemmer’s display in St. Louis. About sixty years ago the buildings were torn down.

the Hawken shop in 1862. But according to the research of Hawken expert John D. Baird that is not true: on the one hand, because since the start of the Civil War Gemmer had been working in the St. Louis state arsenal as a gunmaker with the rank of corporal. On the other hand, because the business directories of the city indicate William L. Watt as owner up to 1864, and Gemmer not before 1866; thus the takeover was not clinched until 1865, toward the end of the Civil War.

As a young, penniless immigrant with not much work experience Gemmer didn’t want to shell out everything at once. However, he had some money in the shop: according to Baird, Gemmer probably received shares in it, as did a man named Joseph Eterle. At first the lion’s share was with Watt. John Baird suspects that during the war Gemmer put all his disposable money into the shop: “*We can...assume that he was able to keep buying more shares in the shop until he succeeded in taking over all the ownership rights.*” Gemmer reached an agreement with Sam Hawken so he could use his signature intact and stamp the guns with “S. Hawken.” This was denied William L. Watt, who marked his rifles simply “Hawken.” Gemmer was able to convince the former owner of the company because the latter had retired after the war. But Gemmer still was not secure in the nest he had made. On the one hand, during the war the shop probably experienced a lack of materials, qualified help, and clientele. On the other hand, it was clear that the days of the muzzleloader were limited. And this was the main business for the Hawken shop, which had also made shotguns and pistols in addition to its famous rifles. Now everybody wanted breechloaders for metal cartridges – preferably repeaters.

So Gemmer designed a patented breech with which he could convert Hawkens into breechloaders while preserving their form. The Gemmer trapdoor breech was shorter and more elegant than the one from Erskine Allen. Allen’s breech was used on Springfield rifles from the US Army.

Gemmer placed the firing pin where the nipple on a percussion rifle is located. The pieces known to date fired the bottlenecked rimfire .46 Spencer cartridge.

But Gemmer soon saw that guns made by hand and in small numbers could not keep up with mass-produced guns from companies in the East of the US. So he switched his emphasis to customizing. He was doing pioneer work (like, to a lesser extent, the Dortmund native Adolph Plate in San Francisco): he adapted military guns to the needs of Indian scouts, prairie hunters, and sport shooters. Sporterizing was a concept developed in the 19th century for sporting and hunting guns. Gemmer preserved the quality and the tradition of the Hawken house: his conversions of Spencer repeaters, Springfield trapdoors, and perhaps also Sharps rifles fol-

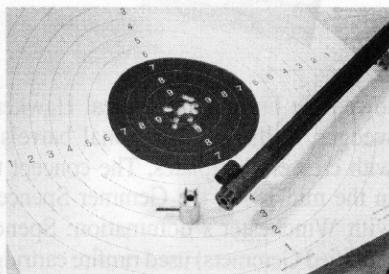
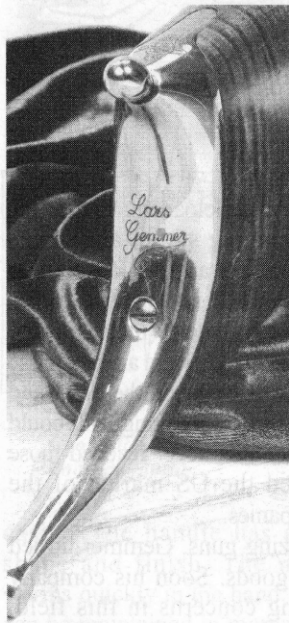
lowed the lines of the typical Hawken muzzleloaders: two barrel wedges, halfstock, octagonal barrels, wiping sticks, and stocks with crescent buttplates. The concept took off at first. But starting in the mid-1870s the Gemmer Spencers could no longer compete with Winchester’s domination: Spencer repeaters (including the modified Gemmers) used rimfire cartridges, which were already passé and weak. Winchester, on the other hand, introduced the 1873 and 1876 centerfire versions. Gemmer’s modified 1873 Springfields could have found a market. However, their numbers never reached those of the breechloaders that dominated the US market of the Remington, Whitney, and Ballard companies.

But when the shop left off customizing guns, Gemmer turned his attention to wholesaling sporting goods. Soon his company became one of the Midwest’s leading concerns in this field. People could buy fishing gear and probably also bicycles, which were booming during the 1880s in the US. At the time the company was no longer located where the Hawkens had founded it. Gemmer moved several times, until finally locating at 700 North Third Street in St. Louis – in combination with a hotel.

Despite all the back and forth movement, around 1900 Gemmer was living a comfortable middle-class life. Since the 1870s he had been married to Juliane Elienne Louise Grewe, and they had two children: daughter Adelia and son Julius. After the First World War they visited the father’s homeland and while there they generously donated the money for the bell at the Rettert church. The Hawken-Gemmer shop no longer existed: J.P. Gemmer had closed it in 1915 and died four years later.

But this does not mean that his heritage was forgotten: in the 1980s the Shiloh-Sharps Company introduced a falling-block rifle that combined the Sharps action with a Gemmer-type stock. A similar and much more successful model was introduced by the Pedersoli Company at the end of the 1990s. And when Lars Gemmer ordered a Schuetzen rifle from Helmut Mohr, the man from Mayen did not neglect to combine elements from Hawken and Gemmer. Lars Gemmer has also shown that he is in tune with the tradition: the twenty-seven-year-old business economist has turned into a good black powder shooter. He has won an individual and team championship and placed in the top quarter in the 2009 championship of the German Shooting Federation.

Gemmer’s history is gaining greater attention also in his home country because of the career he made in America. Several family members, including Lars Gemmer, family historian Gerhard Gemmer, and Harald Gemmer, met with Helmut Mohr, Horst Friedrich, and the author in Rettert. First they visited the beautifully renovated church and inspected the plaque before going to eat – appropriately at a restaurant owned by Klaus Gemmer.



Helmut Mohr's Schuetzen rifle for Lars Gemmer: a true false muzzle, hook butt plate with the owner's name engraved in it, and a removable palm rest. Also Gemmer's certificates, medals, and winning target.



NMLRA member Helmut Mohr and four members of the Gemmer family: Klaus, Harald, Lars, and Gerhard.

It feels like the Gemmer story is coming full circle. Thanks to Helmut Mohr, who pulled all the threads together, arranged important contacts – without him this article would not have existed. To *Visier* author Horst Friedrich for his research into the Gemmer family and the Rettert bell. To Gerhard Gemmer for further research and his family tree. To Walter Fett, Gregory S. Grimes, and the Missouri History Museum for help with locating pictures. And to the other members of the Gemmer family for their support. **MB**

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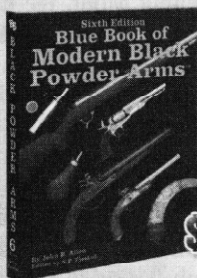


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