

# Hawken Rifles The Mountain Man's Choice

By John D. Baird

Chapter 12 J. P. Gemmer,

Successor to the Hawken

There is some conflict of opinion as to just how and when John Philip Gemmer acquired the Hawken business. His son, Julius P. H. Gemmer, who for many years, was connected with the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, is credited as the source that his father purchased the business from Samuel Hawken in October of 1862.

Horace Kephart, in an article written for the American Rifleman of April, 1924, stated that Gemmer told him he purchased the business from William L. Watt and Joseph Eterle in 1862. Horace Kephart's friendly relations with Gemmer and the employees of the old Hawken shop should assure that his information be as accurate as that of anyone.

It should be remembered that the actual circumstances of the transfer of ownership probably was not considered to be of earth-shaking consequence, so it is doubtful if anyone bothered to record every small detail. In view of the circumstances, one could be excused for indulging in a bit of speculation as to how and when the ownership actually changed hands. When one is faced with choosing between public records, and the record of events as recalled from memory, it is discretion that prompts us to rely upon the public record.

Using recorded facts, and supplementing these with an understanding of current events of the period, we can often make creditable assumptions as to what probably took place. Before we indulge in such and exercise, let us review the public record.

The St. Louis directories for the year 1859 listed William S. Hawken, son of Samuel, as being the proprietor of the Hawken business at 21 Washington Avenue. Since Samuel Hawken left the city on April 20th, he must have turned the shop over to his son in 1858, in order for the directory for 1859 to pick up the change of ownership. It is safe to assume that Samuel Hawken did not just pick up and go; such a trip would require advance planning.

The very next year the directories record another change in ownership of the Hawken business. Here again, we may assume that the change took place either late in 1859, or very early in 1860, so that the directories for that year could reflect the change. We do not mean that the timing was deliberate; just that the changes took place before the directories were made up for each particular year, and therefore could be reflected in those directories.

At any rate, the directory for 1860 show the following advertisement:

William L. Watt  
Successor to W. S. Hawken  
Rifle & Shotgun Manufacturer  
21 Washington Ave.  
Hawken Rifles always on hand

Now here is a fine point! William Watt was advertising as always having Hawken rifles on hand. He does not say that he has S. Hawken rifles; simply that he has Hawken rifles on hand. He was perfectly aware that Samuel Hawken was in the gun manufacturing business in Denver, yet he is listed as being the proprietor of the business in St. Louis. Why advertise a change in proprietorship, if indeed, Samuel Hawken had merely taken a vacation of sorts, and left his shop in the hands of others? The only logical conclusion one can reach is that William L. Watt did indeed purchase the business, or at least an controlling interest, from William S. Hawken, who had received it from his father, or was acting in his father's behalf. Upon completion of these negotiations, William S. Hawken went to Denver, Colorado Territory, to join his father. When Sam later decided to return to St. Louis in retirement, William S. took over management of the Denver shop.

It is interesting to speculate about how William L. Watt marked the rifles he made and sold while Samuel Hawken was in Denver. Did he simply make rifles in the Hawken style and leave them unmarked? One rifle has come to this writer's attention that could conceivably be a clue to this puzzle. This rifle, in the collection of Edwin Louer, of Tucson, Arizona, while undoubtedly of 1855-65 vintage, has as its only marking, the single word "Hawken". While there is no doubt about the rifle's authenticity, it does reflect workmanship a bit different than that encountered in other Hawken rifles. This writer is of the opinion that his is one of the rifles made and marketed by William Watt. His use of the name Hawken would be acceptable, since he had purchased the business, and the name was a recognized trademark. Because Sam was still making rifles and marking them S. Hawken, Watt probably was not free to use the full name. Gemmer, who came into ownership after Sam's retirement, was under no such restrictions. It may be that he negotiated an agreement with Samuel that would assure him unfettered use of the Hawken stamp, Gemmer, who had an interest in the shop, would have been quick to see the advantage of having unlimited use of the full Hawken stamp. We submit that this is the agreement negotiated between he and Samuel Hawken in 1862, and that the passing of time and faulty memories have contributed to the present day confusion about the various transfers of ownership.

The October 1940 issue of Muzzle Blasts carried an article copied from an issue of "Arms Collector of the United States", and whose original author was Julius H. P. Gemmer, son of John Phillip Gemmer. In this article, Julius Gemmer established the fact that his father was born in Nassau, Germany, in June of 1838. His

parents were William and Maria Gemmer. After his mother passed away, John P. Gemmer accompanied his father to the United States in 1855, crossing the Atlantic in a sailing ship, and landing in New Orleans. After traveling up the Mississippi River by steamboat, the Gemmers located in Booneville, Missouri, and remained there for four years. It is here that J.P. Gemmer first learned the gunsmithing trade, but it is not known for whom he served as apprentice while in Booneville.

The year Samuel Hawken went to Denver, Gemmer arrived in St. Louis and found employment with Emanuel Kleinhenn. He was employed by Kleinhenn for one year, and then in 1860, went into the employ of William Watt.

Here again is a point of some confusion. Julius Gemmer states that Watt was merely in charge of the Hawken business-- city directories indicate he was actually owner by purchase. The choice of wording in his advertisements could hardly be interpreted otherwise.

At the outbreak of the War Between the States, Gemmer offered his services to the United States Government. He was given the rank of Corporal, and served as gunsmith in the Government Arsenal, located in St. Louis. This arsenal, with its 60,000 stand of arms, played a role of some importance in the early stages of the conflict.

While Julius Gemmer reports his father purchased the Hawken business from Samuel Hawken in 1862, the city directories continue to list Watt as proprietor and it is not until 1866 that Gemmer is listed as owner.

Here we may speculate a bit! We know nothing of Gemmer's financial background, but it is not likely that the son of a wealthy German emigrant would seek employment as an apprentice in a gun shop. Much more likely is the premise that the Gemmers were not wealthy, and J. P. Gemmer had to seek such employment as he was best fitted for. Had he been supplied with sufficient capital, he could have become a merchant of guns, instead of maker and repaired of such merchandise. We feel fairly safe in our assumption that J. P. Gemmer was a poor boy, who had to start at the bottom, and by dint of hard work, and good management, made his way to the top. That he was able to acquire the Hawken business, and successfully continue it in a highly competitive business world is some indication of his ability.

The point we wish to make here is that in 1862, J. P. Gemmer, aged 24 years, had been in this country a mere seven years. Four years of that period had been spent as an apprentice, and another year in the employ of Kleinhenn. After another year of working for Watt, and then a year in the Government Arsenal, it would seem most unlikely that he was affluent enough to purchase a business such as the Hawken Manufactory. Much more likely is the premise that over a period of years, he was able to buy increasing shares of the business, until such time as he was able to assume full ownership.

Lacking full information concerning all the small details of the transaction, it is somewhat difficult to reconstruct the chain of events. Gemmer's commitment to the Government Arsenal undoubtedly prevented him from active participation in the Hawken business, so he would have had to rely heavily on a qualified person acting on his behalf. With the financial aspects of the business being bolstered by Gemmer's investments of cash, Watt would have been able to continue the business through the difficult war years. This writer's research has not brought to light just what part the Hawken shop played in contributing to the war effort. Quite likely they were plagued by the same shortages of material lack of skilled help, and loss of markets that was the fate of other small businesses. Without the financial base of many successful years in business, William Watt could have come perilous close to losing his investment. In such an event, small but steady transfusion of capital by Gemmer might have been the thread that held the business intact. Since Gemmer did not marry until 1872, it would have been very possible for him to devote a major share of his income to such "transfusions," with full knowledge that eventually he would assume control of the business.

At the age of 34, Gemmer married Miss Louise Grewe, also of German parentage, and to them were born two children, first a daughter, named Adele, and then a son, whom they named Julius.

At the close of the Civil War, J. P. Gemmer was able to take his place as the proprietor of the Hawken Manufactory, and was to remain in that position until he closed the doors in retirement, some fifty years later. In October 1919, only four years after retiring, Mr. Gemmer passed away, and was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery, not far from where Samuel Hawken had been buried some thirty years earlier.

Elsewhere in this volume, we have touched upon the impact breech-loading firearms were to have upon the gunmakers who had built their business around the production of muzzle-loading arms. This must have been a particularly difficult period for young Gemmer! Just getting established as owner of an old, highly esteemed muzzle-loading rifle manufactory, he was faced with the unrelenting competition of the breechloader from the start. His skillful sporterizing of the Spencer carbine is an indication that he was aware of his need to keep pace in a rapidly changing world. While the demand for Hawken "Mountain Rifles" was to continue for quite some time, it was a steadily diminishing market, as new and better breech-loading arms came into use.

The brass case, with its centrally located primer, made possible the powerful, long ranged, single-shot breech-loaders that wrought such havoc among the buffalo herds. When the repeating rifles of Winchester and others could nearly equal the performance of the Sharps and Remington single-shots, the market for muzzle-loading rifles could only be among the Indian tribes. Even here it could not offer much, for the Indians were also quick to see the advantages of a rifle you could load today, and shoot all week.

While it is established that the Indians armed themselves with whatever they could get their hands on, it is also true that they would expend any effort to acquire a Henry repeating rifle, and later exhibited the same enthusiasm for the Winchester when it was developed.

J. P. Gemmer faced up to this challenge with the enthusiasm of the young, and with the enterprise of his Germanic heritage. Elsewhere we have discussed the Spencer rifles and how he "Hawkenized" them.

In the Missouri Historical Museum, of St. Louis, there is displayed a number of examples of his skill and enterprise. Over the years of being in the firearms business, Gemmer was able to build a fine collection of rare and beautiful guns. This collection was turned over to the Missouri Historical Society by his children upon his death, and are displayed to the public at the Jefferson Memorial Building in Forest Park.

Among those firearms displayed is one that has received the "Hawkenizing" treatment at the hands of Gemmer. Originally a trapdoor Springfield, it has been completely rebuilt, except for lock and breech. The original hammer has been replaced with the regular Hawken hammer, modified at the nose in order to strike a firing pin, rather than a percussion cap. Chambered for the 45-70 government cartridge, the breech remains unchanged in its function, but the barrel is octagon, and fitted with an underrib and guides for a cleaning rod. The stock is conventional Hawken halfstock pattern with double set triggers and scroll guard of iron.

Among a number of guns in the display that are marked J. P. Gemmer, St. Louis, two are of particular interest. At first glance they appear to be regular Hawken "Mountain Rifles," but a closer examination will reveal them to be very neatly made breech-loading cartridge guns. Differing in only minor details, both rifles are marked on the top barrel flat with the following inscription, "J. P. Gemmer St. Louis Pat applied for." Both rifles are chambered for the rimfire, bottlenecked .46 caliber Spencer cartridge.

The firing pin is housed in the patent breech section of barrel, emerging through an orifice where normally one would expect the nipple for a percussion cap to be, were the rifle a percussion fired "Mountain Rifle". The breech is opened by raising a hinged block that is set into the barrel immediately ahead of the patent breech. This block is hinged to the barrel on its upper foremost edge, and swings up and forward much like the breech mechanism of the 1873 Springfield rifle. Other than the hinge feature, there is little resemblance to the breech of the Springfield, being much shorter, and having a much different arrangement for extracting the fired cases. An ingenious arrangement is used for locking the breech in place for firing.

The workmanship of these two rifles, as is the case with all such rifles marked J. P. Gemmer, is superb, showing great care and skill was employed in the making of these rifles. The placard with the

exhibit states that Gemmer could not make these rifles by hand and successfully compete in a business that was being dominated by large companies mass producing guns through the use of machinery.

So, after more than sixty years of producing new guns, the old Hawken shop had to bow to the inevitable. No longer able to compete in the manufacture of breech-loading guns, and the muzzle-loading "Mountain Rifles" relegated to status of relics," J. P. Gemmer was forced to reorganize his business so as to adapt it to the changing needs.

With skilled artisans in wood and metal in his employ, Gemmer was well situated to serve the growing number of gun "cranks" that were forever testing and seeking to improve the cartridge guns of the day. In his efforts to serve these customers, both as custom gunsmith, and supplier of ammunition and other sporting needs, he was able to expand these services into one of the major wholesale houses of sporting goods. Julius Gemmer states that his father's stock of loaded shells and metallic ammunition, which he bought by the carload, was depended upon for many years by the local jobbers for certain of their requirements. Horace Kephart, in his article in the April 1924 issue of the American Rifleman, speaks at great length about the Gemmer shop and of it being the favorite rendezvous of sportsmen and rifle "cranks".

Mr. Gemmer maintained the Hawken shop at the address of 21 Washington until construction of the Eads bridge across the Mississippi River forced him to find new quarters. In 1870, he located in 612 North Third Street, and then in 1874 moved to 600 North Third. In 1876 he moved the business again; this time to 764 North Third, and 1880 to 700 North Eighth Street. It was at this address that the business was closed by Mr. Gemmer's retirement, thus bringing to a close one of the oldest firearms businesses in the United States at that time.