



Three traditional styled fullstock chunk guns. Top: brass mounted Lancaster 1" x 48" .45 caliber; middle: iron mounted Tennessee 1 3/16" x 48" .50 caliber; bottom: iron mounted 1 1/8" x 46" .45 caliber. This gun is ugly, but it has set several records on the chunk line at the NMLRA Nationals in Friendship, Indiana.

What Makes it a Chunk Gun?

by Lowell Gard

Chunk guns come in all shapes and sizes. This month's cover illustrates a nice one, but it's only one gun among many that can qualify as a chunk gun.

Under NMLRA rules (number 13.4), just about any traditional-looking round-ball rifle with fixed iron sights can be shot for record in a chunk match. There is no weight or caliber limit, and the only major restriction is that no false muzzle is allowed.

The roots of over-the-log shooting lay in the Appalachian mountains and the farm country of western Kentucky and Tennessee, and in southern Ohio and Indiana. Many matches were shot with the same rifle that the owner used for hunting game in the woods where he lived. He shot patched round lead balls and used black powder exclusively. However, many of the chunk shooters in old photos and paintings can be seen using rifles that were obviously built for the dedicated purpose of winning log matches. These log guns were too long and heavy to carry in the woods, or very far at all for that matter.

The essential ingredient for successful over-the-log shooting

The rifles that those folks used in their matches were built locally out of materials found in the area. That means most of the rifles of Appalachian origin were iron mounted and stocked with local wood, usually walnut, cherry, or maple. By "iron mounted," I mean that the trigger guard, ramrod thimbles (if present), side plate (if present), and butt plate (if present), were hand forged out of wrought iron. The rifles from Indiana and Ohio are often mounted with brass furniture, but some of those are also iron mounted. Many of the old log rifles were built without a butt plate or any other piece of extraneous metal that could be done without. Sometimes these items were just omitted, as in the case of a side plate opposite the lock, or thimbles for a non-existent ramrod. Instead of an iron or brass butt plate, the wood at the butt was shaped to suit the shoulder and then heel and toe plates installed to prevent splitting or breakage at the weak points on each end.

Most of the percussion rifles were either conversions from flint, or started out as a drum-and-nipple setup. Original log rifles from the period will have full- or half-stocks with very simple lines. Patch boxes are sometimes encountered on the old chunk guns, but more often the buttstock will contain only a grease hole or two, or nothing at all. Some originals will have a ramrod and thimbles, others will not. If a rifle did have ramrod thimbles, it often didn't have one at the rear entry. Many full-stocked originals will have a flat spot on the underside of the fore end six or eight inches from the muzzle to keep it level on the chunk.

Barrels on the originals will tend to be long – usually at least 42 inches – octagonal, and heavy – usually at least one inch across the flats, and often as wide as an inch and a quarter. Many of the old originals had barrels over 48 inches, and some can be seen in old photos extending up taller than the shooter standing with his rifle with the butt on the ground. The bore size of these guns was generally somewhere in the .40's and sometimes up to .50 or even .52 caliber. Smaller calibers are often seen in original rifles, some even as small as .32 or .36, but most will be a bit larger.

So if you want to build or buy what we might call a "correct" and functionally competitive chunk gun for shooting in today's matches – one that will pass "traditional" muster at virtually any chunk match put on by any group in the country – here's what I recommend.

First of all, build a rifle that conforms to tradition. That's a broad classification, and usually not too difficult to understand in principle. But the devil is in the details. At any chunk match, at the Nationals or elsewhere, you will see anything being shot from offhand squirrel rifles on up to specialty rifles built to push the limits of the rules. Most matches around the country, even if they don't conform to NMLRA rules, will have a rule requiring the rifle to be of a traditional hunting or traditional match style. But what constitutes a "traditional" match rifle is open to long (and often heated) discussion. As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said when trying to define pornography back in 1964, "I shall not today attempt further to define the

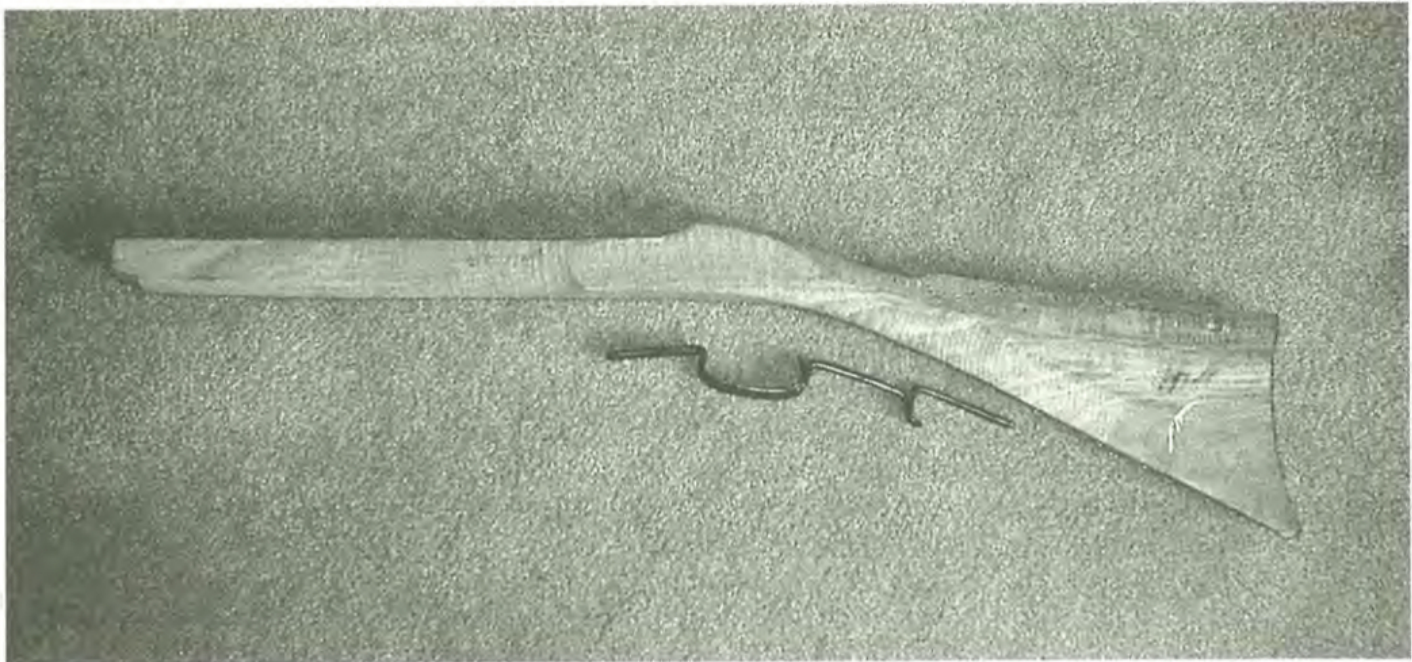
kinds of materials I understand to be embraced ... *but I know it when I see it.*"

Sometimes it's easier to state what tradition *doesn't* include. A traditional rifle can't have a rollover cheek piece or Monte Carlo-type comb, a laminated wood, plastic, rubber, or composition stock. It can't have a thumbhole in the stock, nor can it have little grooves cut into a pistol grip for your trigger hand. It can't have a foot or a flat spot or an extension or a handle on the butt for resting it on the ground or for holding it up off the ground in an artificial manner. If it has a butt plate, it has to be made out of iron or brass, not plastic, rubber, or aluminum.

The "action" has to be either percussion or flintlock, but it can't be an in-line percussion or a sealed ignition (one that uses a primer). It can be an underhammer or sideslapper percussion, but some matches outside Friendship will limit what's acceptable as a traditional underhammer – the spring has to be the trigger guard and not a coil spring, for example, and the stock will have to be of a more or less plain or offhand configuration.

The rifle should have a good quality, match-grade barrel. The barrel is the heart of the chunk gun and must be capable of giving you tack-driving accuracy at 60 yards. The barrel should be of .45 or .50 caliber and rifled with a slow twist to allow for heavy charges to stabilize round balls at a high velocity (velocity is your friend in chunk shooting). That's not to say that chunk matches aren't shot and won by .32's or .54's, but most chunk shooters these days will be shooting a .45 or a .50 with a twist of around 1:56 up to 1:66. The best shooting rifle I own is a 46" x 1 1/8th inch, .45 cut with one turn in 66 inches. At 60 yards it will shoot .445 balls into the same hole all day long with 90 grains of 2f Goex. Some shooters prefer a heavier caliber because the heavier ball is less affected by wind. True, the wind will have a lesser effect on a heavier ball, but it is still subject to wind to some degree, so you can't just shoot and ignore your flags on a windy day and expect to do well. A lot of skill is required to shoot a short string measure no matter what caliber you choose.

Most shooters prefer a heavy barrel because it will lie on the chunk more firmly and require less concentration on fol-



This precarved halfstock with a 1 1/8" barrel channel from Virgil Otto at Gunstocks Plus will make a fine chunk gun.

low-through hold than a light barrel will require. A good middle-of-the-road chunk barrel will be about 46" or 48" long, octagonal, and an inch and an eighth or an inch and three-sixteenths wide. The gun can be either full- or half-stock, but in either case it should have a ramrod channel and thimbles (even if you don't put a ramrod in it) because there are some local matches that specifically require that the rifle have provision for a ramrod.

By the same token, although traditional rules require fixed open sights, some local matches will allow adjustable sights. The fact is, though, in the chunk game a set of adjustable sights will probably do you more harm than good if you actually start adjusting them in the middle of a match. That's why some matches will let you in with adjustable sights (or Minie balls, or inline sabot blasters for that matter) - it's just another way to separate the greenhorns from their cash, so to speak. But if you want to be assured of being legal at any match you may travel to, install fixed, open sights on your barrel.

As far as stock style goes, look at the old guns pictured in Walter Cline's *The Muzzleloading Rifle Then and Now* or in Jerry Noble's books (*Notes on Southern Long Rifles, Vols. 1 & 2*). Because you're shooting the rifle from the prone position, you will probably want to have a bit less drop in the stock than what you see on most offhand rifles, but don't overdo that. A more important factor is to be sure that the comb of the stock is more or less parallel to the line of the bore so that it doesn't come back and slap you in the face every time the gun recoils. Remember, when you lie down behind that rifle, you soak up every bit of recoil it produces. Your body doesn't swing with the recoil, as it does offhand. Shape the stock so it slides back under your cheek instead of rocking up into it.

As for decoration, (if you feel like you simply *must* do it) the best advice is to keep it simple and old looking - no California Custom Shop chrome, no rosewood and mother-of-pearl diamond inlays, no laser-carved pictures of eagles and deer frolicking in the wilderness at sunrise. If you want to have some fun and do a little Rococo scroll carving on your stock or put some silver wire inlay into the lock panel, go ahead. Nobody is going to throw you out of a chunk match for having a gun that looks too pretty.

But a word of caution is in order here: Lots of guys will stand by their new rifle and argue with the rules and say that in Ned Robert's book (*The Muzzle Loading Caplock Rifle*) or in Walter Cline's book (*The Muzzleloading Rifle Then and Now*) there's a picture of such and such an action or such and such a rifle that looks just like theirs and therefore, "It ought to be legal." And, true enough, there are pictures and references to rifles and actions in those books that depict guns from the 1800's that would not be allowed today under the rules of most chunk matches around the country. The point, though, is not that the rifle in question was first built or invented in 1760 or 1840 or even 1880. The point is that such rifles of a non-traditional or technologically advanced design or style do not depict what we now perceive as the common rifle of the over-the-log shooters of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Keep in mind that the idea in chunk shooting is to replicate the old style of precision shooting with the old traditional tools and methods used by those old match shooters and mountain dwellers back a hundred or more years ago. Stick with that premise and you'll have more fun, get into fewer arguments with judges and range officers, and get more satisfaction out of winning at a tough game. **MB**

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