

# A Quack... A Creak... And A Boom!

## A Look at an Unlikely Trio of Original American Art Forms

*What's wrong with this picture?*

*Old farmer Flanagan sits on his front porch, slowly rocking away in his sturdy rocker, his Kentucky long rifle perched across his lap, waiting patiently for the o'er-flying ducks to land on his pond, just a stone's throw away — lured there by the v-shaped array of hand-made duck decoys.*

The answer? Plenty. But more on that later. The interesting thing, however, is that our fictitious farmer has managed to align himself with three of the most originally American forms of artistic craftsmanship: the duck decoy, the rocking chair and the long rifle. An unlikely trio, to be sure, but each one uniquely American in either its inception or innovation.

Written by **Titos Menchaca**  
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A pair of R. Madison Mitchell Duck Decoys provided by Hugh Umbel, Bear Creek Traders at McHenry, Maryland.

Also, Larry Gardner's beautiful "Butterfly" long rifle and one of Harold Dodson's hand-crafted Sam Maloof style rocking chairs.

## Duck Soup

While some might credit Americans with such inventions as baseball, the blues or The Home Shopping Network, let's look a bit farther into antiquity. We pick up our story about a century ago when guano miners stumbled onto a cache of ancient First Nation artifacts in a cave in northern Nevada. Archeologists from Cal Berkeley and the Museum of American Indian's Heye Foundation subsequently extracted an astonishing 10,000+ artifacts over a four-month period. These artifacts had been almost pristinely preserved by two things — one was that many were stored in dugout pits in the cave floor, keeping them cool and safe; the other being an earthquake that had blocked the entrance to the cave some 150 years ago, restricting access to bats and small wildlife. Since most of the artifacts indicated a lucastrine, or lake side, subsistence, the scientists knew immediately that these inhabitants of Lovelock Cave, as it's now called, hunted fish and fowl from now fossilized Lake Lahontan, which dried up about 1,400 years ago.

But what was truly extraordinary about this archeological find was what was discovered in a sub-chamber of one of the dugout storage pits. Hidden away even from his contemporaries, beneath a false bottom, an ancient hunter had stashed 11 duck decoys, made from marsh bulrush, or tule. There were both finished and unfinished decoys, some with actual duck feathers to add to the realism, and each was wrapped individually and with great care by the owner. These decoys, believed to have been crafted around 200 B.C., are to this day the oldest known examples of artificial waterfowl decoys.

These early hunter-gatherers, probably early Shoshonean/Northern Paiutes, employed the abundance of nearby raw materials and an ingenious technique to craft their decoys. Tule rushes were bent, split and tied to fashion heads, bobtails and breasts. Several of the decoys found had ochre coloring on the heads and blackened breasts, along with actual white canvasback feathers attached, making them astonishingly realistic.

These western tribes weren't the only ones to make decoys. Today, the Cree of the Northern Great Lakes region still make standing goose decoys from tamarack sticks and



**Decoys believed to have been crafted around 200 B.C. A cache of 11 duck decoys at removal from Lovelock Cave, by Llewellyn L. Loud. Photo by M.R. Harrington, 1924, photo courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.**

Cree Indian children play with tiny duck decoys made from single cattail leaves. Additionally, the Nipmuc (“Freshwater People”) Tribe of New England currently conduct cultural workshops on how to make cattail duck decoys.

Among all indigenous cultures, hunting was part of a natural order that formed a segment of the eco-cycle between the two-legged, four-legged and winged creatures of a given region. Native American peoples hunted and gathered from the land only what was needed for their livelihood. This balance was understood, respected and practiced for centuries. However, once the floodgates of immigration opened and the populations of the eastern seaboard began to explode, commercial gaming of waterfowl increased at an alarming rate to try to keep up, causing problems by upsetting the careful balance that had existed for so long. (*see side bar, next page*)

With relatively fewer birds in the mix, hunters soon realized their decoy skills had to improve. Carvers began making more life-like decoys, using lighter woods like cedar. Over the past couple of centuries, several regional carving styles emerged, each with its own processes and materials. Barnegat Bay decoys, for example, are usually hollow with poured lead weight and made from Atlantic

## A'Hunting They Would Go!

It's estimated that hunter-gatherer tribes began occupying what is today the upper Nevada region over 3,500 years ago. Since no records are extant from these ancient civilizations, scientists can only speculate how these prehistoric people actually carried out their hunts. However, necessity — not to mention the possibility of going hungry — is a great catalyst for invention, innovation and determination. The probable scenario had the tribe's most patient and hardy hunters lying in wait in the predawn hours, teeth chattering from the chill of the northern Nevada fall, hoping to take advantage of the dim light to lure their airborne prey into nets hanging on poles above the decoys. Once the winged vanguard hit the netting they were almost immediately piled upon by the stragglers, causing pandemonium as their thrashing caused the whole dopping to become hopelessly entangled. The hunters waded into the bedlam and, with a quick and skillful twist, snapped their catches' necks and tossed them to companions who waited with a large gathering-basket.

Later, European immigrants used decoys as part of an overall strategy that also employed low-lying boats (sometimes called "sneak boxes") used to creep up on unsuspecting flocks. Smooth-bored "widowmaker" guns — so-called because of their dangerous recoil — were used to shoot up to eighty ducks at a time. The birds were then shipped off to supply the insatiable demand of restaurants and finer homes in the Mid-Atlantic region. Such rampant depletion of the waterfowl, however, led to The Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918, banning the sale of game birds.



white cedar. A handful of carvers gained some degree of fame as well. R. Madison Mitchell, of Havre de Grace, MD, was known as the Dean of the Upper Chesapeake Bay decoy makers, perhaps because it is said he produced over 100,000 carvings in his lifetime, some of which now bring over five figures at auction.

No discussion on contemporary decoy carving would be complete, however, without a nod to the Ward Brothers of Crisfield, MD. Lem and Steve Ward set the standard for decoy carving with their realistic style of flat-bottomed, over-sized-head carvings that floated like real ducks as opposed to the upper bay decoys that rolled and tossed with the waves. Though they were hunters as well, the Ward brothers would allow ducks and geese to land and swim among their decoys, affording them an excellent view of the forms and colors of the birds, which was reflected in their art. Much of their work, as well as Mitchell's and many other carvers, can be viewed in the Ward Museum in Salisbury, Maryland.



*Meanwhile, back at the farm, our favorite sodbuster is not having much luck luring waterfowl to his pond. Might be because he has the decoys set in that pesky "v" shape, which, as any self-respecting mallard will tell you, is how geese fly, while ducks fly in either lines or cloud formations. Not that he'd have much left even if he was lucky enough to bag a juicy hen with that long rifle — and that would be his second mistake.*

## The Long And The Shot Of It

It's a fairly simple mechanism, really. The pulling of the trigger trips the spring that releases the hammer that holds the flint that strikes the frizzen, causing a spark that ignites the powder in the pan that travels down the touch hole (or fuse hole) and ignites the main powder in the barrel, causing it to ignite and the resulting combustion to send the ball spinning down and out of the 40+-inch barrel, finding its mark up to three football field lengths away. (And if you can say that last sentence all in one breath, pat yourself on the back.)

That, my friend, is how the flintlock mechanism of the Kentucky Long Rifle works. And the Kentucky, or Pennsylvania, Long Rifle is also a big reason why today we're not all still subjects of the Queen and having tea and crumpets every afternoon.



**A reenactment at Fort Frederick — the rifles above are not “long rifles” but are smooth bore muskets typical of the period and the military. Most of the colonist defenders used long rifles with great success (right inset photo). Revolutionary reenactments at Fort Frederick give a sense of realism and a feel for how it was during the Revolutionary Period. Call Fort Frederick State Park at 301-842-2155 for a schedule of the reenactments and other park programs.**

Allow me to explain.

Although the Chinese are generally credited with inventing gunpowder, they used it mainly in their fireworks and, later, in primitive cannon-type devices. Subsequent innovations saw a more personal utility with the advent of a rudimentary form of hand guns, which were known in Italy by 1397, and in England where they appear to have been used as early as 1375. Arms-making made steady progress for the next couple of centuries, until the mid-1600’s, when the invention of the flintlock replaced older, less efficient mechanisms like the matchlock and the wheel lock. It stands today as the lock type with the longest tenure in history — some 200 years.

Initially, early Europeans’ weapon of choice on the frontier was the smooth bore musket or trade gun, which was mass produced in European factories and shipped to the Colonies. These weapons had an effective range of about fifty to eighty yards, were very heavy and their accuracy was suspect. For a variety of reasons, these were issues that had to be addressed for survival in the new frontier. First, the immenseness of the frontier, stretching from New York into Pennsylvania, through Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas and into Georgia, was traversed mainly on foot. This

meant that the intrepid explorer had to carry his supplies on his back, including his heavy rifle. Since these trips lasted for months at a time, food had to be derived from the land. How disheartening would it be to creep down within range of a fine buck, line up your shot, then have him bound off out of range — spooked because you had to get so close he heard your growling stomach?

### ***German Engineering To The Rescue***

Although some experts still argue the fine points of origin and lineage, it is generally accepted that the long rifle was the product of German gunsmiths who immigrated to new settlements in Pennsylvania and Virginia as early as the 1740s. These gunsmiths were on the cutting edge of 18-century technology, employing not only the flintlock mechanisms of the day but “rifling” — the cutting of spiraling grooves inside the barrel to stabilize the projectile’s flight — as well. This produced, along with the first system of aiming, amazing accuracy. Add to that the lengthening of the barrels to between 40 and 48 inches (allowing for more complete combustion, thus more power) and the downsizing of the ball to about .50 caliber (lessening the amount of lead and powder needed), it’s easy to see why



**Larry Gardner with one of his exquisite hand-crafted Pennsylvania Long Rifles. This one is affectionately called “The Butterfly Rifle.” Larry built this beautiful piece of art for his wife, Joan. It has 70 butterflies of inlaid sterling silver and brass and it took sixteen weeks to build. Look close and you will see metal inlaid into metal as well as the beautiful sugar maple “Tiger Striped” stock. It has a 38”, .36 caliber swamped barrel, and although it’s never been fired it will hit the mark with the best of them. Larry also does the engraving the old fashioned way; no electric engravers or air driven gravers. Larry Gardner can be reached through his website at [www.artandarms.net](http://www.artandarms.net).**

these innovations opened up the playing field to dimensions unheard of before. The long rifle was a unique invention that solved unique problems. Specifically, it was lighter, more accurate and more reliable than previous weapons. Not to mention it required less maintenance and had a much longer range.

So, what does all this have to do with tea and crumpets? Well, during the Revolutionary War, General Washington assembled about 1,400 frontiersmen or backwoodsmen carrying Kentucky Rifles. These American riflemen could boast to being able to drop a man at three hundred yards with relatively little difficulty. This was an acute measure of skill in the Revolutionary era. While in training camps, their feats of marksmanship astonished onlookers, some of whom were British spies. As word of these buckskin-wearing riflemen quickly spread to the British Army, Washington soon observed that the British gave his backwoodsmen wide latitude — especially since one of his more daring strategies was to station these sharpshooters on the flanks

during battles to pick off British officers. As a hoax, he dressed up some of his musket-bearing soldiers in buckskins, knowing that the British assumed that anyone wearing frontier garb was carrying a Kentucky.

Although breech-loading and percussion caps eventually ousted long rifles from the cutting edge of weaponry, there is still a thriving market and interest in these amazing guns. The Contemporary Longrifle Association is a non-profit organization “dedicated to the art of contemporary long rifles, accoutrements and related items.” They hold an annual show and meeting and act as sponsor or clearing-house for events related to long rifles and muzzle-loaders spanning the country from Wyoming to Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, among other states.

Just like duck decoys, rifle making has its own styles, or schools, that stemmed from particular areas and masters that influenced later builders’ and artisans’ designs and shapes. Additionally, today’s long rifle makers must have a working knowledge of several disciplines in order to practice their craft.

“You have to be part gunsmith, part metal smith and part master woodworker,” says Larry Gardner of Silver Springs, MD. “And it helps to have an artistic eye, too.”

Gardner should know. Already an established commercial graphic artist, he began his nearly two-year rifle making apprenticeship in 1965 before striking out on his own. It was a natural progression for a South Dakota country kid who started hunting at age six, accompanied only by his .22 rifle and his horse.

“Times were a bit different then,” he quips.

Gardner’s artistic eye and meticulous attention to detail have since established him as one of the premier makers of Pennsylvania Long Rifles in the world. Although he will do custom work, Gardner prefers to carve his original designs in the curly maple stocks he uses. His metal smithing might employ brass, sterling silver, nickel and steel. So unique is his artistic inflection on each of his guns that fellow riflemakers have dubbed his original works “The Larry Rifle.”

“I guess it’s just the way I carve the wood and set the metal,” he says. Adding, “Each one takes about six to seven weeks to complete. The most time I’ve ever spent on a single rifle was about four months, which translates to about six hundred to seven hundred hours.”

Gardner sees his style as fitting into the traditional Pennsylvania school, preferring the basic architecture of the long graceful lines made popular by riflemaker John Armstrong, who plied his trade during the first half of the nineteenth century out of Emmitsburg, MD. The different schools can be distinguished by the discerning observer using a variety of different measures, including the carving, the inlets, how the patchboxes are set and the angle of the stock’s “drop,” to name a few. Today, thanks to books, videos, the internet and other media, almost anyone with moderate handskills can begin to learn to build these amazing, functional pieces of history. However, there are only a relative few highly skilled craftsmen in the country who pride themselves on reproducing these legendary weapons at a level that is part art, part armory... and all American.

*Editors Note: I would like to thank Terry Mulligan for referring me to Larry Gardner. Terry is a bit of a legend himself in black powder circles. He is an excellent marksman with a host of 1st place trophies and National Championships to his credit. Terry has a well stocked gun shop, Mulligan’s Gun Shop (304-738-3219) in Ridgeley, WV just across the Potomac River from Cumberland, Maryland.*

— Lance C. Bell



HAND CARVING AT BUTT



FOREARM



COCK AND FRIZZEN



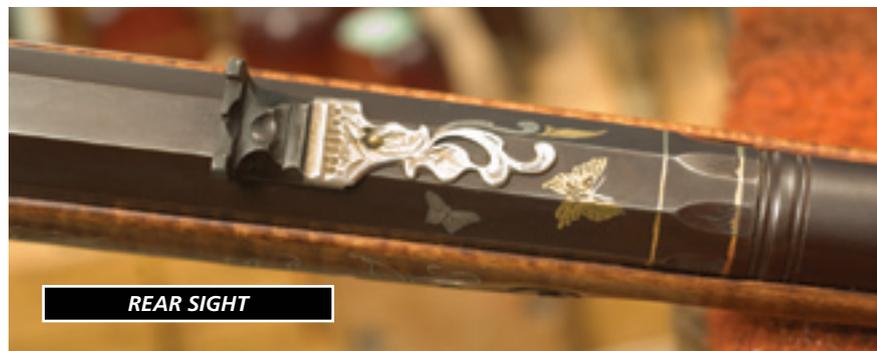
FRONT SIGHT

## You Say Kentucky, I Say Pennsylvania...

So, is it the Pennsylvania or the Kentucky Long Rifle? Technically, most of the guns forged in antiquity were made somewhere in Pennsylvania. This happened to be where many of the German and Swedish gunsmiths settled in The New World and it was uniquely situated as a starting point for longhunters, trappers and explorers heading into the wilderness. That wilderness included Kentucky. The term “Kentucky Long Rifles” was first popularized in an 1812 song “The Hunters of Kentucky,” an ode to the riflemen who helped Andrew Jackson during the Battle of New Orleans. However, it would be highly unusual for any of the rifles to actually be *made* in Kentucky, since the gunsmithing equipment of the day was much too heavy and bulky to be transported across such unforgiving terrain. The most famous frontiersman associated with the Kentucky Long Rifle is, of course, Daniel Boone. Legend has it that he carried one through the Cumberland Gap and that, during the siege of Boonesborough in 1778, a British officer who had been hiding behind a tree poked his head out, only to be killed instantly by a ball to the forehead fired by Boone. The shot was later confirmed by witnesses on both sides at a distance of 250 yards. Ironically, Daniel Boone was born and spent his youth in Berks County, Pennsylvania.



TOE PLATE



REAR SIGHT



UNDER FOREARM



PATCH POCKET

## Rockin' USA

Wait a minute! Back up here. Did he say “*six hundred to seven hundred hours*”?

Spending that much time on *anything* would surely be exhausting. So much so that anyone, be he rifleman or farmer, would certainly need to relax afterwards. And what better way to take a load off than by sinking into a comfy old rocker?

The concept of the rocker goes back to the Middle Ages. First, by the Dutch who hollowed out large trees to make cradles whose rocking motion would soothe crying infants — a concept employed much later by the Shakers on larger beds for the infirm, allowing for easier manipulation of their bodies to battle bedsores. The Renaissance introduced more ornate use of curved skis (also referred to as *skates* and *rockers*) on the bottoms of cradles and even toys, as in the rocking horse. Interestingly, the term “rocking chair” first appeared in the Oxford English dictionary in 1787.

Early American rockers were mainly used by women, who were expected to sit quietly in parlors, hands folded in front of them, while the men smoked cigars and spoke



**Harold Dodson waxes one of his “child size” double rockers. Made of solid black walnut, the chairs take as long to make as the full size ones. Harold works full time making these beautiful chairs and other custom items. Harold can be contacted through his website at [www.dodsonwoodworking.com](http://www.dodsonwoodworking.com). For faster service, Harold prefers to be called directly at 864-878-2900.**



of politics and the world. The rocking motion presumably allowed for the outlet of pent up energy. By the mid-1800s, the strict Victorian mores had relaxed enough to allow men to enjoy the calming rocking motion as well.

Famously, Napoleon kept one in his villa in Italy, Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) was said to be very fond of his, and President Lincoln was sitting in a Rococo Revival rocker on that fateful night in Ford’s Theater — weary after a long series of Cabinet meetings. Other, *ahem*, ‘First Rockers’ were well-used set pieces of both Presidents Kennedy’s and Carter’s oval offices.

## School(s) Of Rock(ers)

Now, if it seems that rocking chairs are a part of the national landscape, it’s because they’ve been here about as long as this has been a country. There is a popular belief that Benjamin Franklin invented the rocking chair, but while old Ben was quite a prolific inventor and certainly owned one or two, there is a fair bit of controversy about whether he was the first to put curved skis on an otherwise normal chair. Some believe the pioneers had to improvise by adding flat boards to the bottoms of their chair legs so they wouldn’t sink into the mud on the prairie.

What is more interesting, however, is that although no one person can be solely credited with its invention, the rocking chair has had many notable innovators over the years.

In the late 1800s, German furniture craftsman Michael Thonet utilized a steaming technique to make the wood pliable, after which he bent it into the graceful lines that distinguished his world-famous bentwood rockers. This ‘bent wood’ technique allowed furniture makers much more latitude in expression of their visual unity and fluidity.

New England furniture maker Lambert Hitchcock was another such innovator. With an artist’s eye and a clock maker’s precision, Hitchcock made chairs like no one ever had before. Instead of crafting chairs one piece at a time as was the norm in the early twentieth century, this master woodworker took his cue from watchmakers he observed who made several interchangeable parts. His preference to hand stencil (a new innovation at the time) designs on the backs of chairs — along with uniquely designed seatbacks, arms and legs — gave the mass-produced Hitchcock chairs the look of custom furniture.

Who would think that such a ubiquitous piece of Americana would inspire so much thought and innovation? Almost from the beginning, though, distinct designs evolved to embrace the styles of the day. The Windsor-style rocker is distinguished by its comb-style, bent or birdcage back frames and its spindly legs. Boston rockers are a variation on the Windsors, generally having a higher back and a seat that curves down in front. Then there’s the Shaker-style rocker, known for its simple beauty, ladder backs and woven seats, usually made from leather, wood or cane.

On the other end of the spectrum from the austere Shaker rocker-makers was innovator Leopold Stickley of the L. & J.G. Stickley Company. Based on the east coast, Stickley rockers are distinguishable by their use of heavy wood — usually mahogany or cherry — and the plush leather on the seats and, sometimes, on the backs as well.

However, when you talk about American-made rocking chairs, you have to mention Sam Maloof.

Maloof was a southern California woodworker who began his career in 1948, and within ten short years was already famous for his freehand bandsaw techniques and sculpted parts. Famous collectors of his work included Ray Charles and US Presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. Over the years, his rockers have been



**Like the larger chair, the small chair (known as the Teddy Bear) has the same craftsmanship and materials to last through generations.**

exhibited in numerous museums and fine art galleries, including the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among others. Maloof’s designs are distinguished by their clean lines and long, ski-shaped rockers that extend back like an antelope’s horns.

In the end, the real measure of a rocker is in its ability to entice one to rest their weary bones in it.

“A chair has to sit in a certain way that looks inviting,” says South Carolina chairmaker Harold Dodson, who for many years has patterned his rocking chairs in the Maloof style. “Because it’s the only piece of actionable furniture there is, it has to make you feel confident it will hold you securely and contour to your body.”

It’s that secure rocking motion that appeals to us on a primal level as human beings. This is essentially what has allowed the rocker to sustain its popularity for so many generations. For those who build them, it’s the struggle to achieve that delicate balance of comfort and appeal that drives them.

“And it’s what I strive for when I make each and every one of mine,” Dodson adds.



The quack of a duck lured to a still pond by a finely-carved decoy... the boom of a rifle shot, launching a lead ball three hundred yards to its target... the creak of a wooden floor beneath the steady rocking of a sturdy, hand-crafted rocking chair. These are the sounds associated with three uniquely American art forms. And those who practice these art forms are artisans in every sense of the word. Craftsmen who may spend a lifetime dedicated to mastering their chosen field.

Ah, what a feeling... to scrutinize the detail of an exquisitely painted decoy... or feel the weight and balance of an authentically replicated Kentucky Long Rifle... or ease weary muscles into a perfectly contoured seat of a hand-made rocker... maybe, just maybe, old farmer Flanagan might be on to something after all.

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*Even though some aspects of this article take place outside our area, duck decoys, long rifles and rocking chairs have been a big influence and a part of this area’s history and have contributed to the heritage of the Appalachian Region.*