

My Tennessee Maid

a rifle by Royland Southgate

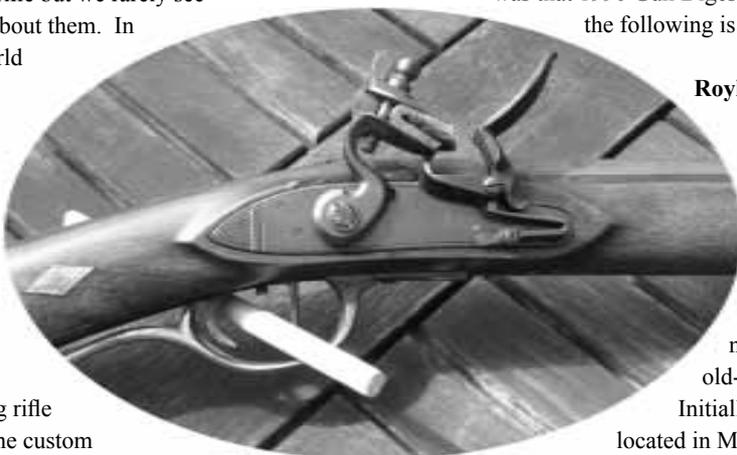
by Paul Roberts

The 'Kentucky' rifle along with the Winchester lever action must be one of the iconic firearms of all time even if most people probably assume they were all made in Kentucky. The impossibly long profile, sharply curved stock and concave butt plate are almost unique and of course they are flintlocks. I have always been intrigued by the American long rifle but we rarely see them over here and knew little about them. In 2004 I attended the MLAIC World Championships in Batesville, Indiana and we were invited to visit the Walter Cline Range at Friendship just half an hour south. Friendship as most people call it is the home of the American muzzle loaders and I have been back every year except this competing on the pistol line. Friendship is the place not only to shoot your long rifle but you can also buy one from the custom makers or buy everything you need to build one in your workshop.

I decided I had to have a long rifle and with the dollar then nearly two to the pound they didn't seem out of reach. The problem would be getting one home, taking it back on the plane would be complicated as my baggage allowance was taken up with case of pistols and shooting kit. It would have to be shipped to a dealer if I could find a case long enough. A compromise came along at the Spring Shoot 2007 when I spotted a nice half-stock flinter in a dealers rack. The .45 rifle had been made by the previous owner, Jim Weir, he died earlier that year and his rifles were being sold off. The half stock fitted diagonally in my suitcase, it was only a piece of wood after all, and the barrel was sent home to a dealer.

In April last year (2008) I was auctioneer for the annual OTF auction and arrived to find a flintlock long rifle already on the rack. It was labelled as being made by someone called Royland Southgate in 1953 which of course meant nothing to me at the time. The rifle looked okay outside and the bore looked good but the date of manufacture meant it would have to be 'on-ticket'. Being the auctioneer I knew the reserve but a few people were having a good look and resigned myself to the knowledge that I would probably be out-bid. When Lot H32 came round no one seemed interested and my hammer fell to me at the reserve. I had a Royland Southgate rifle for £350!

With the rifle I was also given a copy of an article about Southgate published in 2000 and that article in turn made reference to the 1990 44th Edition of Gun Digest for more biographical data. I was clearly meant to have this rifle and learn more of the maker because the very first thing I saw at the Phoenix meeting trade show was that 1990 Gun Digest and it is from that article that the following is gleaned.



Royland Southgate

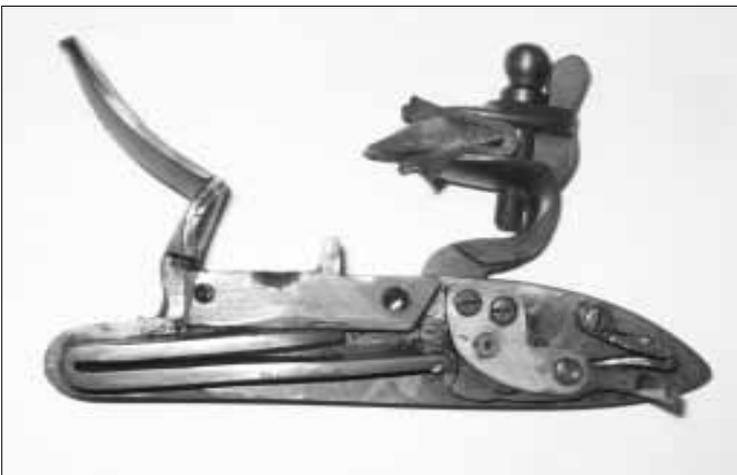
Southgate was born in 1915 in Nashville, Tennessee. A civil engineer by trade as well as a tool and die maker, he began making rifles at the age 31 in 1946 having learned gun making skills by watching the old-masters who were still around.

Initially his gunmaking shop was located in Madison, Tennessee where he built his first 268 guns. All his guns are numbered and the barrel flat is boldly engraved with a distinctive Southgate signature. In 1953 he moved to a farm in Franklin, Tennessee which gave him room to build and shoot his rifles. Thursday evenings at Rebel Hill Farm became a popular gathering place for lovers of rifles, bourbon, strong coffee and pipe tobacco.

In all Southgate built 1007 guns of which 158 were pistols. His preference was for flintlocks but if pressed would make the customer a caplock. For many years the reference section at the back of old Dixie Gun Works Catalogues gave his dates of manufacture and these show he was making 30-50 guns a year. His guns were not overly fancy, instead they reflected craftsmanship and clean traditional lines of guns meant to be used, not left in the rack on display. Southgate rifles have a reputation for accuracy owing to meticulous hand fitting of parts and the superb Southgate barrels which were rifled one groove at a time. In addition to inletting of stocks and hand planning the barrel flats, Southgate cast and

machined all his metalwork including handcutting screws. His handmade parts helped to restore many antique long rifles and provided numerous parts that formed the foundation for companies like Dixie Gun Works.

The last Southgate rifle was made for actor and dedicated blackpowder shooter, the late Slim Pickens. Pickens was filming near Franklin and tracked down the farm and the two subsequently





Royland Southgate

became close friends. Pickens wanted a percussion rifle but was talked into a flintlock. Southgate delivered the rifle No.1007, one of the most elaborate made by Southgate, to the Pickens ranch in Wyoming and insisted on firing the first shot. Southgate died on June 3rd 1979.

Southgate rifles, his "Tennessee Maids" as he called them, form a unique and important link in the chain of firearms history. They were made during a time when original long rifles were still being used in the Appalachian mountains by second and third generation owners. No one called them replicas for Southgate was simply making muzzle loaders the same way as his fore fathers. Royland Southgate was the last of America's old time gunmakers.

My Tennessee Maid

My rifle is number 243 so it was one of 63 made in 1953, one of Southgate's most productive years. My rifle is .40 calibre, flintlock of course, with a 38" barrel and 54" overall, it weighs around eight and half pounds. The rifle is typically plain, unfigured maple stock with brass diamond shaped inlays each side of the wrist, brass half moon inlaid on the cheekpiece and some carving between the cheekpiece and butt hook. The patch box is precisely inletted and almost plain. The trigger guard is unadorned and houses a double-set trigger. The front trigger has to be found carefully as there is not much room inside the guard. I have not tinkered with the trigger, it breaks just fine. One peculiar feature is the rear trigger has to be set to put the rifle on half cock, apparently this is not unusual on American locks, best practice, of course, is to only go onto full cock once you have the rifle in the shoulder and the barrel level.

Out on the barrel is perhaps a replacement rear sight rather than any buck horn pattern you might expect, this could of course have been installed by Southgate if ordered by the original customer. The foresight is a conventional brass blade. The tang has two screw holes as yet unfilled where a previous owner had fitted some form of rear sight. There are also two grub screw holes to the left barrel flat



Southgate rifle and half-stock rifle by Jim Weir

and a small repair to the stock just below denoting another rear sight option. A nice feature of the barrel is WEICHOLD CIN. O engraved on the muzzle, was this the name of the original owner or a supplier of the barrel blank? I resorted to the power of the internet and typed in Weichold Cincinnati, There a few Weichold's in the Cincy area but I didn't find anyone who might have been a barrel maker in the early 50's, so perhaps Weichold was the original owner.

Before I could fire the rifle I needed the 'makings'. I settled on a .395 ball and got Jeff Tanner to open up a smaller redundant mould of his making and Mrs T supplied some 7/8th patches in 10, 12 and 15th thickness. For powder I weighed out some Swiss 2 in 30, 35 and 40 grain loads.

First outings with a 'new' gun are always interesting and while the Southgate didn't disappoint it is clear it will take some getting used to. My first groups were shot off-hand in the traditional manner, none of this resting left elbow against the body, the lock sparked well and the rifle shot pretty well to point of aim at 25m. That first session and, due to lack of time, only two others since indicate that 40grain of Swiss 2 with a 12th patch under the .395 ball will put five holes inside a 50mm circle and would probably do better with a younger pair of eyes behind the sights!

I know my rifle has been in this country for around 15 years having been brought over from the States by the previous owner. I would be interested to hear from any other owners of Southgate rifles either in the UK or further afield. Is there perhaps a register of Southgate firearms?



The author and his Tennessee Maid