



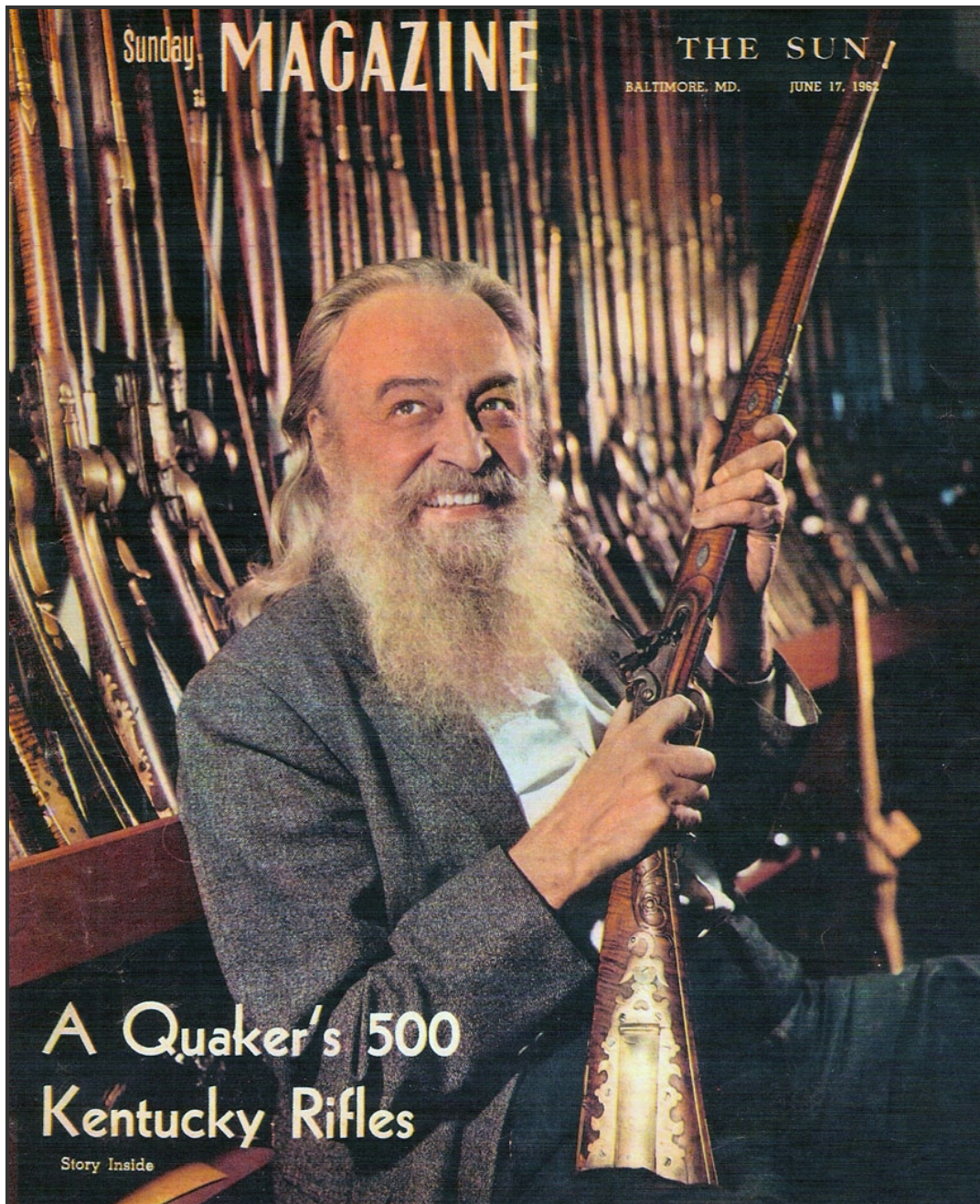
Articles

"A Quaker's 500 Kentucky Rifles"

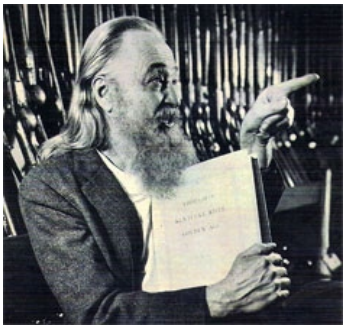
The Sun Sunday Magazine

Baltimore, MD

June 17, 1962



Joe Kindig, Jr., a York (Pa.) Quaker who has never fired a gun, has assembled the world's largest collection of Kentucky rifles, the weapon with which Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and other frontiers-men tamed the American wilderness.



With characteristic intensity, Joe Kindig, Jr., talks on the subject which has interested him for over 40 years, the Kentucky rifle. His authoritative book on the rifle sells for \$27.

He has been busy 30 years racking more than 500 of the guns in his antique store and his brick Colonial home, a few blocks apart on Market Street. He hunts out Kentuckys himself, but by now his reputation as a collector brings most of the Kentucky owners to him. He has amassed, in certain classifications, more authoritative information on the Kentucky than any other living weapons expert. He admits it. He is a puzzling mixture of bombastic and humility. He may sound off to a point of rudeness on something with which he disagrees. His collection of Kentuckys, for example, has been said to be worth \$250,000. "Bosh!" he says. "You can't measure any intelligent collection of anything in dollars." Minutes or hours later he may run into some disappointment, anything from a flat tire to a business setback. "Thank you God," he blurts out, "I guess I needed that lesson."

His hair grows in a tawny mane to his shoulders, and it has a sheen as beautiful as a woman's. Three or four times in the course of an hour's talk, without a break in the conversation, he may whip out a short comb

and sweep the hair back over his ears. That finished, he applies the comb to the big Moses-shaped beard that covers the middle button of his crisp white shirt. There's no tie under the beard.

"In one week," he says, "one man told me I looked like John the Baptist, and another said I looked like Jesus. A day or two later a man told me I looked like the devil. I'll cut my hair any time I have good reason to."

He had a good reason in 1952.

"Joe," a wealthy York business man said, "when are you going to get a shave and a haircut and look like other folks?" "On the day," Mr. Kindig snapped back, "when you give \$5000 to charity."

The man took him up on it, and wrote \$2,500 checks for two needy causes. Mr. Kindig, as good as his word, sat painfully through a shave and haircut. "It was awful," he told a reporter. "With my hair and beard gone, I looked as ridiculous as you do right now."

He is a vegetarian. He doesn't wear socks. ("I don't get colds, either.") His wardrobe consists of three coats, two pairs of trousers, two pairs of shoes (one shined), an overcoat which he hasn't worn for two of three winters, and a few white shirts. He doesn't own a hat.

He comes from a long line of Pennsylvania stock. His grandfather, Eli, was a horse and mule dealer who became so wordly successful he was asked to drop out of the Mennonite community. His father succeeded in the same business. Young Kindig seemed aimed in the same direction when he graduated from Penn State's agricultural college in 1921. He tried farming for a year. "It was to much work," he says.

Because his father wouldn't allow a .22 rifle, a BB gun or any other weapon capable of harming human or animal, young King had bid 30 cents for a useless old Kentucky at an auction and taken it home. That led to an interest in antiques in general and Kentuckys in particular. When Joe gave up, farming he became a full-time antique dealer, his work today.

A religious man- he reads his Bible and meditates for two hours daily - he sees divine guidance in development of the Kentucky.

"It took 50 years for that rifle to evolve," he says. "And it took 150 years to develop a man good enough to carry it. god brought the two developments together at the end of the Revolutionary War.

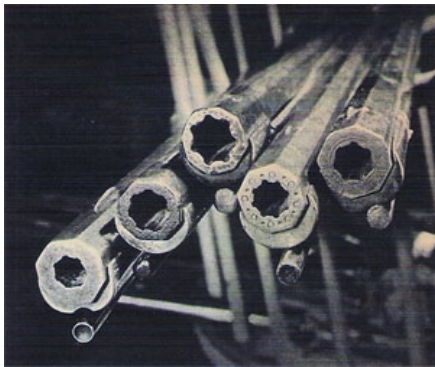
"Europeans began moving into this country in the early Seventeenth Century, but for more than 100 years they didn't have much more than a beachhea here. They weren't frontiersmen; they were merely transplanted to a frontier. They weren't Americans, either. They held on to their old country ways, speech, clothing, thinking.

Germans and Swiss settlers who gravitated to Pennsylvania brought with them their own cumbersome *Jager* (hunting) rifle. It was heavy, inaccurate, and wasteful. But the weapon was rifled, which put it a cut above smooth-bore muskets. The rifling consisted of grooves cut so deeply that much of the propelling powder explosion



Kindig has more than 500 Kentuckys in his York (Pa.) antiques store-the largest collection in the world. Each one is unique, the custom work of a single craftsman who had to master skills or ironwork, machining, metal and wood carving and inlay work.

escaped around the sides of the bullet.



Muzzles of these Kentuckys show variety of rifling and calibers used. Note how the wooden stocks cradle muzzles all the way to then end.

Some models shot .75 caliber bullets, eleven bullets to the pound. Lead was so expensive in this new country that hunters dug their used bullets out of animals, or anything else they hit and used them again.

The Kentucky Rifle, so-called because it was a favorite with men who explored, then settled that State, began to develop after the first quarter of the 1700's.

With their primitive new world equipment, gunsmiths learned to heat a flat bar of steel to pliability, wrap it around a rod, and forge the mass into a long gun barrel. They bored out the barrel, cut in shallow rifling, milled the outside of the barrel into an octagonal shape, then fitted on a wooden stock that ran the length of the gun.

The result was a long rifle, about 5 feet, slender to a point of gracefulness. The average weighed less than 9 pounds. It shot

a smaller bullet- 70 balls to a pound, an used less power.

To this day, gun enthusiasts admire the Kentucky's balance. It was a plain, purely utilitarian weapon in its early days. Not many men knew how to use it.

"Half of the rifle was the man who held it," Kindig says, "The man who became is master was the man who depended on it for his meat and his protection."

"He got to know how his rifle would perform on a dry day or a wet one, in high wind or calm. He knew how to save powder by loading light for a short shot, and how to tamp it in heavy for a long one. He could hit just about any part of a man he wanted to every time at 200 yards, four times the sure range of the old German rifle, and some of those frontiersmen could perform a near magic with it."

The Kentucky was never a soldier's weapon. It was too slow to load, wouldn't adapt well to a bayonet, and it required long experience to master. In the Revolution, handled by the rough men who knew it, it was a lethal factor against the British at King's Mountain and Saratoga. In the War of 1812, fired by Kentuckians and Tennesseans, it mowed down British by the hundreds before they could carry their own smooth bore muskets into useful range.

It was a patriot's song about the battle at New Orleans which gave the famous Pennsylvania-made rifle its now-common name:

*"... But Jackson he was wide awake
And wasn't scared a trifle,
For well he knew what aim we take
With our Kentucky Rifle.
So he led us to a cypress swamp;
The ground was low and mucky.
There stood John Bull no martial pomp
-And here was old Kentucky ..."*

Two years ago Kindig finished a book "Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in the Golden Age," which sells for \$27. The weapon's golden age, as he defines it, ran from the end of the Revolution to about 1820.

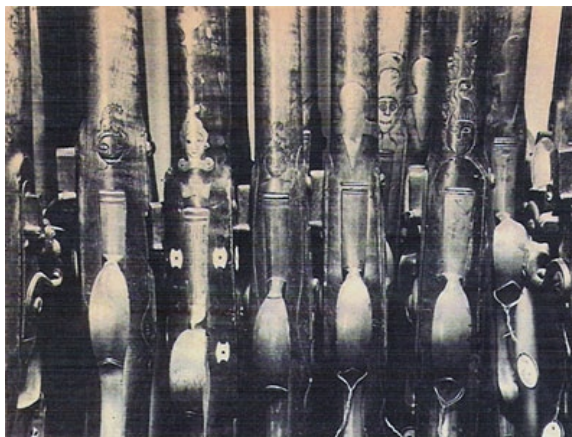
"The frontiersman who came through the Revolution," Mr. Kindig says, "was the first real American. He was free. He was confident. He said to himself: 'I am right and my rifle is right, and I'm ready to tangle with any part of this big country on its own terms.'"

He estimates there must have been more than 600 gunsmiths who turned out Kentuckys, some just a few, some quite a few.

Right after the Revolution, with frontiersmen moving out, opening up the whole country, there was great need for the rifle, and craftsman put their best into the weapons to attract more business.

"Ancient guns from Europe show better brass and silver inlay work, finer carving of wood and metal," Mr. Kindig says, "but six or eight artisans must have worked on each of those guns. Each Kentucky is the work of one versatile craftsman."

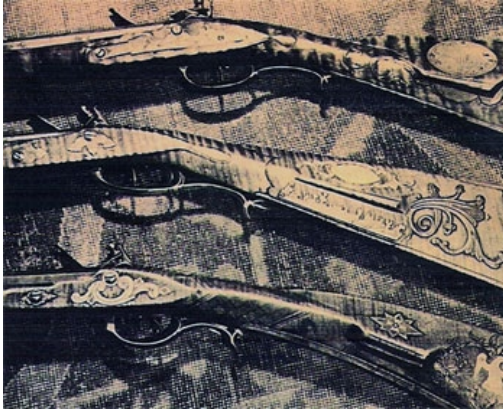
Much of a Kentucky's beauty is in its stock, which referred to by frontiersman as "tiger maple" or "fiddleback



Many craftsmen put their own marks on Kentucky rifles they made. The Indian faces here were popular with Allentown and Bethlehem gunsmiths.

maple." It was sanded for hour after patient hour to a satin smoothness, then stained with a mixture of red dye from boiled henna root, chimney soot, and linseed oil.

Mr. Kindig looks at the Kentucky as a work of art-woodwork, brass patch box, carved wooden stock. He can examine a Kentucky for an hour- he often does- then set it aside without being able to tell you the size off the bore. He has never fired the gun, and knows nothing, nor cares, about the mechanism.



Metal inlays and intricate carvings emboss the satiny texture of the Kentucky's stock. Hand-rubbed for hours and stained with henna root, the 200 year-old wood still gleams.

How much is a Kentucky worth? Mr. Kindig gets explosive again. "How much," he asks, "is a sunset worth? What's the price of a sonnet?"

He hasn't a price tag on any of his Kentuckys. He recalls what he paid for it, figures in a bit of profit, tries to estimate what it will be worth to you to own it, then arrives at a price.

"I don't sell Kentuckys," he explains. "You can buy one from me if I like you, but I don't sell them."

JOE KINDIG RIFLES
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