

The Backwoodsman and The 'Kentucky' Rifle

By BERTHA COCHRAN LANDIS

WHILE much has been written on the Kentucky rifle few people know that it was made in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, or within a ten-mile radius. The first rifles were made soon after the arrival of the Swiss and German settlers in the valleys of the Pequea and Conestoga. It is recorded in Rupp's "History of Lancaster County" that Martin Meylin erected a boring mill near the Big Spring, in 1719.

These pioneers brought with them their ideas on the art of riflemaking and soon, necessity — their own protection — compelled them to invent and improve on the type of rifle they knew in their fatherland. The result was the Long Rifle, later known as the Kentucky rifle. This long rifle soon became famous and was credited with winning the French and Indian War, and the War of the Revolution.

So important had the manufacture of the Kentucky rifle become that Continental Congress in 1776 virtually took possession of the industry in Lancaster and required all makers to deliver all their product to the government. They were allowed four pound six shillings per gun. The most prominent makers at this time were William Henry, Jacob Dickert (Decherd), Henry Dreppard (who put his name on the lockplate), Jacob Ferree and son, Joel Ferree (along the Pequea, 1750), Melchior Fordney, the Youmans family (some members of this family emigrating to North Carolina where they became famous rifleshooters), Matthew Roeser (whose rifles are very beautiful in outline and finish) and more than one hundred others.

General Washington knew these rifles and the backwoodsmen who used them with such deadly aim and precision with Braddock's trained men in the French and Indian War so that he in all probability suggested to Congress the advisability of issuing a call in our great need, to this type of men. Congress lost no time and issued a call on June 14, 1775, for six companies of expert riflemen to be raised immediately in Pennsylvania.

These troops, bringing their own rifles with them, under the command of such men as General Edward Hand, Captains James Ross, Smith, and Cresap were the first troops ever levied on this continent by the authority of a central government. On the following day George Washington was appointed commander-in-chief by the same body.

Within one week a call was issued for two more companies of Lancaster County men. They responded quickly, each man carrying a "Kentucky" rifle made in Lancaster County.

A striking example of the power of the "Kentucky" rifle and the "man behind the gun" was shown at King's Mountain, October 7, 1780, when Lt. Col. Patrick Ferguson of the British Army, took a strong position on a hill. One side was completely inaccessible and Ferguson never dreamed that he could not hold it forever, but he did not reckon with the backwoodsmen who approached and divided themselves into three bodies, and began to ascend the hill from three sides.

The result was that Ferguson, assisted by a number of Tories of that section was entrapped by the backwoodsmen on three sides. He fought hard but the backwoodsmen, mostly Germans, were too much for him and he fell. Col. Patrick Ferguson was killed by the shots fired from Dickert rifles made in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He was of the Scotch nobility and the inventor of the first breech-loading gun. He loaded and fired the rifle seven times in one minute, and was considered to be the best marksman in the British Army.

Wounded at the Brandywine he lost the use of his right arm but quickly learned to use the left. The following amusing incident is told in a letter, written several years ago by Dr. Edwin F. Landy of Cincinnati, Ohio: "At the Battle of King's Mountain a Pennsylvania Dutchman named Hambright (in all probability Captain Frederick Hambright of North Carolina) kept yelling, "Shoot de feller what holds his sword in the left hand and has de schoener shirt" (a pretty shirt—Scotch plaid). Ferguson was killed by bullets from the Dickert rifle. The British loss was nearly four hundred men while the loss of the backwoodsmen was only eighty-eight killed and wounded.

The victory at King's Mountain was called by Jefferson "the joyful turning of the tide" and Bancroft, the historian, declared, "The effect was similar to that of Concord and changed the aspects of the war."

The Kentucky rifle was also the secret of the success of General Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812, the second war with Great Britain. The first war secured our Liberty and the second war sustained it for all time.

The famous muzzle-loading flintlock Long Rifle, made by Jacob Dickert in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the early days figures again in the "Story of the Alamo," published recently by a magazine. This rifle, bearing the name of J. Dickert "fired its last shot at the Alamo," in March, 1836.

"The Alamo was the only real defeat suffered by the Long Rifle in all its glorious history, but there it gave an account of itself so inspiring, that the Alamo became the rallying cry that gave us the State of Texas. Another hundred Long Rifles might have saved the day." It is of great interest to know how, from the day it was carried off by a Mexican from the Alamo, it finally came into the possession of Colonel Walter Finney Siegmund, of Olin Industries, who devoted more than twenty years searching out the history of the famous gun.

"It has an overall length of sixty inches, a barrel of forty-five inches and a bore of fifty-five calibre. It has beautiful inlaid silver fittings and polished brass patch box in the maple stock. It was exhibited at the Jefferson

Memorial in St. Louis and during the Texas Centennial in Dallas in 1936 as the famous 'Alamo Rifle.'

This rifle evidently was once known as Davy Crockett's long rifle "Betsey," as it was recently identified as such by his grandson, C. J. Crockett of St. Louis. This is correct "beyond reasonable doubt."

"The 'Alamo rifle' was presented by Colonel Siegmund to the Alamo on September 1, 1947, in a ceremony in which General Jonathan M. Wainwright participated as his first public act after his retirement from the Army, and was accepted on behalf of the Alamo by Mrs. Andrew Warren Holden, chairman of the Alamo Committee of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas."

For reference see "The So-called Kentucky Rifle" by D. F. Magee in Vol. xxx, Lancaster County Historical Society publications, and the magazine "Sports Afield," July and November, 1947, numbers.

This account is particularly interesting to our Lancaster County Historical Society because, among the descendants of Jacob Dickert were prominent citizens—the Gills, Steinmans and Franklins. George M. Steinman was our honored president from 1896 to 1917.

Further data may be found at the Society's home, 307 North Duke Street, Lancaster, Pa.