

A Tradition of Arms

Americans' "love affair with guns" is a product of repeated necessity. Only a generation ago, guns were an everyday object for a young man.

by Roger D. McGrath

It's often been said, and not meant to be taken positively, that Americans have a love affair with guns. I would say that the love affair is with freedom and that guns are among several tools that have been used to ensure that we remain free. From the day the first colonists set foot on the Atlantic seaboard of North America, arms were regarded as essential. Early references abound. A 1623 law in Plymouth declared, "In regard of our dispersion so far asunder and the inconvenience that may befall, it is further ordered that every freeman or other inhabitant of this colony provide for himselfe and each under him able to beare arms a sufficient musket and other serviceable peece for war." In 1632, the Virginia Assembly advised every man to carry a gun to church in order to train with it after the service. A Rhode Island law of 1639 required that "noe man shall go two miles from the Towne unarmed, eyther with Gunn or Sword: and that none shall come to any public Meeting without his weapon." Connecticut required that all household heads "always be provided with and have in continual readiness, a well-fixed firelock ... or other good fire-arms ... a good sword, or cutlass ... one pound of good powder, four pounds of bullets fit for his gun, and twelve flints."

At first, all firearms came from Europe. Within a few generations, though, the manufacture of firearms began in the colonies. The finest gunsmiths were the Pennsylvania Dutch, who carried the gun-making skills they had learned in Germany to the New World. At Lancaster and Reading, especially, but other Pennsylvania towns also, these gunsmiths not only copied the rifles

they were familiar with back home but by the 1720s had developed a rifle peculiarly adapted to the ever-expanding American frontier. They lengthened the stubby barrel common to European rifles to four feet to allow the black powder more time to burn and to produce greater accuracy at the long distances common to the frontier. Also, in an effort to improve long-distance accuracy, they increased the size of the sights. To increase range and conserve lead, they reduced the bore to less than a half-inch. They enlarged and strengthened the trigger guard to withstand rough handling. They replaced the iron ramrod, which was heavy and difficult to produce on the frontier, with one made of hickory. The use of hickory involved an additional step. Wooden ramrods, even those made of rock-hard hickory, often broke when trying to drive a lead ball down the barrel of a rifle. The solution to the problem came with the grease patch — a small circle of tallow-soaked cloth that was placed under the lead ball before being rammed down the barrel.

The result of all these innovations was the famed Kentucky rifle. Known at first as the Long rifle because of its barrel length, the firearm got the name that made it famous from its vital service on the Kentucky frontier, that "dark and bloody ground." Wherever the frontiersman went, he was not without his Kentucky. A good rifle and steady aim meant food on the table and protection from the Indians. The Kentucky would be used on one frontier after another, from the colonial frontier of the 1720s to the trans-Mississippi frontier of the 1830s. It was the firearm that created what has been called in more recent times the "gun culture" of America.

With the butt of a Kentucky rifle pressed

The Kentucky rifle was the preferred long arm for Americans from the 1720s through the 1820s. An experienced rifleman could "drive the nail" or "snuff the candle" at 70 paces or knock a squirrel out of a tree at 200 yards.

firmly into his shoulder and a steady aim, an accomplished marksman could bring down a deer or man at 100 or more yards and knock a squirrel out of a tree at 200 or more. Pioneers regularly staged shooting contests up and down the colonial frontier, from New England to Georgia. At 70 paces, frontiersmen would "snuff the candle" or "drive the nail." In the former, the lead ball from the rifle would have to pass through the flame of a burning candle, blowing out the flame but striking neither wick nor candle. In the latter contest of marksmanship, the lead ball would have to strike the head of a nail and drive it farther into a post. Some even dared to shoot cups of whiskey off each other's head at 70 paces. Frontiersmen practiced with their rifles from boyhood on. The rifle was a tool more common than the plough. The American language filled with rifle-inspired colloquialisms — "a flash in the pan," "lock, stock, and barrel," "a straight shooter."

When the need arose, the combination of extraordinary shooting skill and the Kentucky rifle made American frontiersmen invaluable soldiers. Upon joining British General Edward Braddock's expedition against the French at Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War, George Washington had 400 frontiersmen with him, all armed with their own Kentucky rifles. The French and their Indian allies surprised Braddock's force and inflicted heavy casualties on the musket-armed British. Washington's frontiersmen, however, took cover



behind trees and carefully aimed every shot, dropping one Indian after another, enabling the survivors of Braddock's ill-fated expedition to retreat. Washington himself, a woodsman and hunter, as well as soldier, owned several Kentucky rifles among his collection of more than 50 guns. Later in the war, Pennsylvania frontiersmen used their Kentucky rifles to clear the way for British General James Wolfe's successful assault on Quebec.

In the American Revolution, the British quickly learned what an armed citizenry — experienced in the use of firearms since childhood — could do. Early in April 1775, British Gen. Thomas Gage dispatched spies to gather intelligence on conditions in the Massachusetts countryside. Among the spies were Ensign Henry DeBerniere and Sergeant John Howe. Howe's "Journal" was published in Massachusetts a half-century after his spying mission, and some have argued that it is really a record of DeBerniere's spying. In the "Journal," Howe describes an encounter he had with an elderly man and his wife at their house on a road leading from the backcountry to Boston. The man was sitting on his porch, cleaning his rifle. "I asked him," Howe reported to Gage,

what he was going to kill, as he was so old, I should not think he could take sight at any game. He said there was a flock of redcoats at Boston, which he expected would be here soon. He meant to try and hit some of them, as he expected they would be very good marks....

I asked the old man how he expected to fight. He said, "Open field fighting, or any other way to kill them redcoats!" I asked him how old he was. He said, "Seventy-seven, and never killed yet."

... I asked the old man if there were any Tories nigh there. He said there was one Tory house in sight, and

he wished it was in flames.... The old man says, "Old woman put in the bullet pouch a handful of buckshot, as I understand the English like an assortment of plums!"

This and other such reports were enough for Gage. He issued orders to march on Concord, capture rebel leaders, and, most importantly, confiscate all arms and ammunition. The bloody colonists must be disarmed! By the time that nearly 800 British regulars, under Lt. Col. Francis Smith, were on the road to Concord, Americans all along the route had been alerted by Paul Revere, Will Dawes, and Sam Prescott.

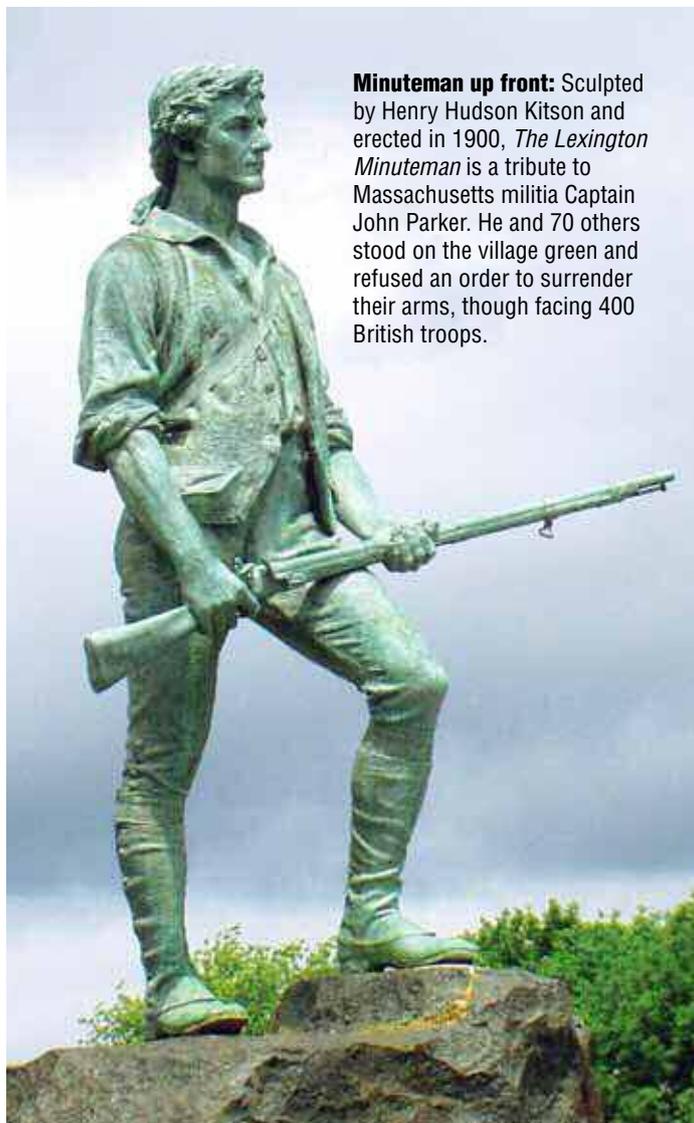
When the British reached Lexington, they found militia captain John Parker and 70 of

his Minutemen — so named because they had to be ready with rifle and shot in one minute — assembled on the village green. In the van of the British advance were Maj. John Pitcairn and his 400 light infantrymen, their scarlet coats and white breeches, and muskets and bayonets, catching the first rays of the rising sun. In the face of this impressive sight, Capt. Parker ordered his Minutemen, "Stand your ground, boys. Don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here."

Major Pitcairn and three other British officers rode to within a hundred feet of the assembled militiamen and shouted, "Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, and disperse!" Parker looked at Pitcairn's overwhelming numbers and decided a pitched battle would be suicidal. He ordered his men to fall out. They did so but not one man would surrender his rifle. "D**n you!" shouted Pitcairn. "Why don't you lay down your arms?" Another British officer shouted, "D**n them! We will have them!"

A shot rang out. American militiamen said a British officer fired. The British claimed an American fired. What is known for certain, hundreds of British guns belched smoke and eight Americans were killed and 10 more wounded. The British then hurried on to Concord, encountering no opposition along the way but hearing guns fired and bells rung in the distance, signals that militiamen were being called to duty. By the time the British reached Concord, hundreds of Minutemen in small scattered groups were there to meet them.

At Old North Bridge, the British troops opened fire on Minutemen, killing two and wounding four, but the Minutemen returned fire and advanced, killing and wounding 15 British officers and men. Outmaneuvered and stunned by the accuracy of the Minutemen's fire, the British abandoned their wounded and fled.



Minuteman up front: Sculpted by Henry Hudson Kitson and erected in 1900, *The Lexington Minuteman* is a tribute to Massachusetts militia Captain John Parker. He and 70 others stood on the village green and refused an order to surrender their arms, though facing 400 British troops.

Stunned British troops lost all unit cohesion and eventually broke and ran. Nearly 500 of them were killed during the battle and another 700 wounded, against American losses of 90 killed and 240 wounded.

Fleeing British soldiers collided with reinforcements trying to move to the front. It was some time before Lt. Col. Smith could reorganize his forces. Even then Minutemen sharpshooters continued to drop British troops wherever they were. By early afternoon Smith had begun a retreat to Boston.

At Meriam's Corner, Brooks Hill, Brooks Tavern, the Bloody Curve, Hartwell's Farm, Parker's Revenge, the Bluff, Fiske Hill, and Concord Hill, Minutemen hit Smith's retreating column again and again. By the time the British reached Boston they had suffered 300 casualties. "The rebels," said Brig. Gen. Hugh Percy, who led reinforcements to aid Smith, "attacked us in a very scattered, irregular manner, but with perseverance and resolution." Percy understood that he was not facing a regular army but something far more dangerous: well-armed Americans

fighting to protect hearth and home, and their liberty.

American militia could not stand up to the volume of concentrated British musket fire, but put some distance between the forces, and the American rifleman could shoot the tar out of the Redcoats. Captain Henry Beaufoy, a British veteran of several wars, remarked:

The Americans, during their war with this country, were in the habit of forming themselves into small bands of ten or twelve, who, accustomed to shooting in hunting parties, went out in a sort of predatory warfare, each carrying his ammunition and provisions and returning when they were exhausted. From the incessant attacks of these bodies, their opponents could never be prepared; as the first knowledge of a patrol in the neighbourhood was generally given by a volley of well-directed fire, that perhaps killed or wounded the greater part.

Beaufoy later said:

It has been readily confessed ... by old soldiers, that when they understood they were opposed by riflemen, they felt a degree of terror never

inspired by general action, from the idea that a rifleman always singled out an individual, who was almost certain of being killed or wounded.

Col. William Thompson's Battalion of Pennsylvania Riflemen killed British troops with such great regularity and from such great distances that the British War Office declared, "The settlers from the backwoods of America used their hunting rifles with so much effect that the only rejoinder was to pit rifle against rifle; for this purpose Jägers [professional German gamekeepers and hunters] were recruited on the Continent."

Of all the American riflemen who fought in the Revolutionary War, the most celebrated was Timothy Murphy. He was born near Delaware Water Gap in Pennsylvania in 1751. His parents, Thomas and Mary, had only recently arrived in Pennsylvania from County Donegal, Ireland. Within a few years, the family moved to the very edge of the frontier, where land was cheap but so too was life. Indian raids were frequent and could mean death or worse, capture and horrific tortures. Back in Ireland, suffering under the draconian Penal Laws, the Murphys had been barred from possessing arms, but in Pennsylvania they freely and proudly owned several guns. Tim Murphy grew up shooting the famed Kentucky rifle. By the time he was in his mid-teens, he had a widespread reputation, among both whites and Indians, for extraordinary marksmanship and fierceness in battle. He served with a company of riflemen throughout the Revolutionary War and turned the Second Battle of Saratoga (aka the Battle of Bemis Heights) into an American rout by killing both British Brig. Gen. Simon Fraser and his second in command, Francis Clerke, from what the British thought were impossible distances.

The stunned British troops lost all unit cohesion and eventually broke and ran. Nearly 500 of them were killed during the battle and another 700 wounded, against American losses of 90 killed and 240

At Lexington and Concord Americans couldn't match the firepower produced by hundreds of British muskets, but for accuracy and distance American riflemen were unsurpassed. A British officer said his troops "felt a degree of terror" when facing riflemen.



wounded. Later, Gen. John Burgoyne, the British commander of the campaign that had led to the battles of Saratoga, and 6,000 of his troops surrendered after American militiamen interdicted his supply lines and cut off his path of retreat. “Wherever the King’s forces point,” said Burgoyne, “militia in the amount of three or four thousand people assemble in 24 hours; they bring with them their subsistence, etc., and the alarm over, they return to their farms.” After the failure of Burgoyne’s campaign, the British War Office discontinued plans for large expeditions into colonial America’s interior. Nonetheless, the British continued to supply and arm various Indian tribes to launch attacks on the frontier.

Also typically expert with firearms from growing up on the frontier was Andrew Jackson. His parents and two older brothers had immigrated to the American colonies in 1765 from County Antrim, Ireland. He was born two years later in the Waxhaw frontier region on the border of North and South Carolina. His father died shortly before he was born, leaving his mother to rear Andrew and his brothers. A neighbor in the Waxhaw community described Jackson’s mother as a “fresh-looking, fair-haired, very conservative, old Irish lady, at dreadful enmity with the Indians.” Indeed, the Indians had tortured and killed one of her sons. “Sustain your manhood always,” she told her boys.

Andrew learned to use a rifle as a young boy, both to hunt game and to defend the family against Indian attacks. When the British army reached the western Carolinas in 1780 during the American Revolution, the 13-year-old Jackson joined other rebel frontiersmen in fighting the hated Redcoats. He also fought Indians, such as the Cherokee, who had allied themselves with the British. In 1781, he was captured by the British. He rightly thought of himself as a prisoner of war and refused when ordered to shine the boots of a British officer. The officer responded by whacking Jackson across the face with a saber. The ugly gash and wrenching pain only strengthened the young lad’s resolve. He continued to defy the British officer. So,



David Crockett was one of the most celebrated riflemen in American history. As a boy on the Tennessee frontier, he became expert in the use of firearms. He bought his own Kentucky rifle when he was 18 and christened it Betsy. He and the rifle were never far apart.

when he was 18. He immediately entered a team shooting match with a good friend. They won first prize and were awarded with a fine steer. A year later he won the hand of Polly Finley in marriage. They soon had their own farm, but Crockett did as much hunting as farming and continued to enter shooting matches.

David Crockett was not all that different from his neighbors. Most Tennesseans were marksmen and hunters. When the War of 1812 erupted and the British sent the Red Stick faction of Creeks to attack American settlers in Tennes-

see and Alabama, which included a horrific slaughter of hundreds of women and children at Fort Mims, Andrew Jackson had no problem in quickly raising a militia force of 2,000 frontiersmen. They all arrived with their own rifles and the ability to shoot holes in a five-inch target at seventy paces. Several thousand Red Stick warriors were about to regret their decision to ally themselves with the British. In the first engagement of the two forces, Jackson’s boys, with only small losses, killed 200 of the Red Sticks. Shooting several of them was David Crockett. Two days later, more than a thousand Creek warriors came rushing out of the woods at the Tennesseans “like a cloud of Egyptian locusts,” said Crockett, “and screaming like all the young devils had been turned loose, with the old devil of all at their head.”

too, did his mother and two older brothers, who would later die as a result of British maltreatment, making Andrew both an orphan and the only surviving Jackson. He was all of 15.

By the time he was 17, he was studying law. Within a few years, he was appointed a district prosecutor for Tennessee, still a wild frontier. He did as much Indian fighting as prosecuting. In his first fight, his commanding officer described him as “bold, dashing, fearless, and *mad upon his enemies*.” His reputation grew fast, among both whites and Indians, and he was soon elected a representative, then a senator, but he was always willing to serve as a militiaman and do battle.

One of those who would later serve under Jackson in the Tennessee militia was David Crockett. He was familiarized with firearms as a young child by his older brothers and his father, who had been one of the “over the mountain boys” in the Battle of Kings Mountain in the American Revolution. By his teenage years, Crockett had become a crack shot. Like Murphy and Jackson, Crockett’s marksmanship was needed to hunt game and to protect his family from Indian attacks — his paternal grandparents were killed by Creeks. After using firearms that had been passed around the family for years, he bought his own Kentucky rifle

Crockett and his comrades coolly marked their targets, took careful aim, and began a disciplined, accurate, and deadly fire. The battle was over in 15 minutes. By then, the ground was littered with the bodies of more than 350 Red Sticks. Those warriors who had survived the carnage were fleeing pell-mell through the woods. The final battle occurred at Horseshoe Bend, where the Tallapoosa River loops around a peninsula. Here a thousand Red Stick warriors had the advantage of a stout

barricade protecting them on one side and the river on the other. No matter. The accurate fire and fierce fighting of the Tennesseans overwhelmed the Creeks and left all but a handful dead.

Although Jackson had a thousand Army regulars and some sailors and Marines with him at the Battle of New Orleans, he also had 2,000 buckskin-clad frontiersmen from Tennessee and Kentucky. The British were stunned by their defeat. It was clear that the American tradition of an armed citizenry, trained in the use of firearms since childhood, was a formidable force. As British general John Burgoyne had said during the American Revolution, the Americans were able to grow an army out of the countryside overnight.

If rifle-toting American frontiersmen were relentlessly moving across the continent, Mexicans were not. Spanish settlements in Texas had expanded little beyond their 18th-century beginnings. By 1820, they were scarcely holding their own against marauding Indians. San Antonio, the provincial capital of Texas, was not much more than a village of adobe buildings and log and mud huts, and no more than 800 people. There were fewer than 3,500 Mexicans in the whole of Texas. Mexico decided it needed American frontiersmen to settle in Texas and form a buffer between the old, struggling Spanish settlements and rampaging Indians.

In 1821, Moses Austin, Connecticut-born but then living in Missouri, was granted 200,000 acres of land in Texas for a colony of Americans. Before he could take action on the grant, he died of pneumonia, leaving the venture in the hands of his son, Stephen. Not as bold or dynamic as his father, Stephen nevertheless got the grant increased to millions of acres and attracted Americans, first by the dozens, then by the hundreds, to the province. The Spanish governor of Texas, Antonio de Martinez, could not have been more pleased. He was now becoming governor of something more than an isolated, struggling, and crude frontier outpost.

In 1826, Austin organized a volunteer force of mounted rangers — the men who would years later become known officially as the Texas Rangers — to control the Indians, especially the Comanche. The rangers came with their own horses and firearms — and training since their earliest

years with both. Instead of allowing the Indians to take the initiative, as the Mexicans had, the rangers penetrated deep into Indian country and put surprised warriors to flight. Although purely volunteers and serving only intermittently, these early rangers changed the balance of power on the Texas frontier and expanded the area open to peaceful settlement, something Mexicans had been unable to do.

By 1830, there were 16,000 Americans in Texas, nearly five times the number of Mexicans. Problems began when Mexican President Anastasio Bustamante decided to consolidate power and reduce the autonomy of the Mexican states. Americans in Texas — Texians — were losing the rights they had when first invited to settle. Bustamante was driven from office in December of 1832, and when Antonio López de Santa Anna became president in April of 1833, Texians rejoiced, believing that Santa Anna, a Federalist, would restore the rights abolished by Bustamante. Instead, Santa Anna dismantled the Federalist program, ignored the Mexican constitution of 1824, and ruled dictatorially. After crushing revolts in several northern Mexican states, Santa Anna arrived in Texas expecting another walk-over for his large, professional army. This time, though, the army would be facing not peons but a populace of frontiersmen, armed and experienced with guns since childhood.

The first action occurred before Santa Anna's arrival. The military commander at San Antonio was ordered to disarm the Americans. He first went after a cannon that had been given to the settlers at Gonzales for protection against Indian attacks. When a force of 100 Mexican cavalry reached the banks of the Guadalupe River, they found 18 Texians, armed with rifles, waiting on the other side. The commander of the cavalry column, Francisco de Castañeda, told them he had come for the cannon. The Texians told him he'd have to wait until the mayor of Gonzales returned from a trip. With the river high and the Texians ready to



Stephen Austin and the American settlers on his grant in Texas were welcomed by the Mexican government because they were armed and could protect the frontier from marauding Indians, something the Mexicans had been unable to do.

shoot, Castañeda moved upstream to find another ford and make camp.

In the meantime, reinforcements, led by John Henry Moore, arrived, swelling the number of Texians to 140. Messengers were sent back and forth from Castañeda's camp to Moore's. Castañeda said no harm would befall anyone if the Texians would peaceably surrender the cannon. Only the cannon was now prohibited. They could keep their rifles. The Texians, however, rightly suspected this was only the first step in a general disarmament. They hoisted a white flag with a depiction of a black cannon and the words "COME AND TAKE IT." Before Castañeda made a move, the Texians attacked his camp. After an hour of fighting and having suffered two dead and

several wounded, Castañeda withdrew. The Battle of Gonzales was called the “Lexington of Texas.”

By the time Santa Anna and his army of 6,000 troops crossed the Rio Grande in February 1836, several battles had been fought and the Texians, despite lacking supplies, military discipline, and coordination of their efforts, usually outfought the Mexican regulars, including forcing Santa Anna’s brother-in-law, Martín Perfecto de Cos, to surrender. Santa Anna did take the Alamo and kill its 187 defenders but it took him 13 days to do so and cost him more than 600 of his troops. He had only six weeks to enjoy his victory before the Texians routed his army and captured him at the Battle of San Jacinto. Routed is probably an understatement. Santa Anna’s army suffered 630 killed, 208 wounded, and 730 captured. The Texians had 9 killed and 30 wounded.

Although on a far smaller scale, we here in California were proud of our Bear Flaggers who revolted against Mexican control in 1846. Like those in Texas, they were not professional soldiers but rifle-toting frontiersmen who had settled in California.

Growing up we all took turns in school on flag duty. Each morning we would first raise the Stars & Stripes and then our California Bear Flag. Every time I looked at the big grizzly I thought of the Bear Flaggers, most of them described as crack shots. It seemed to me that guns were our birthright

as Americans. We had them. We were free. Oppressed people didn’t have them.

In 1950, I got my first guns, cap pistols that came with my Hopalong Cassidy outfit. I wasn’t quite four. My first real gun was a hand-me-down from my older brother, Dave. It was a Stevens single-shot, bolt-action .22, about as humble as any rifle could be — but I was elated. My brother carried the rifle in World War II — well, kind of. My family lived in Pacific Palisades, a seaside community in Southern California. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, everyone feared the next attack would be the harbors and aircraft plants of the greater Los Angeles area. At the time a Japanese invasion didn’t seem far-fetched, especially when Japanese submarines attacked and sank ships within sight of shore and bombed an oil field just west of Santa Barbara. The men of the Palisades took turns patrolling the bluffs that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. They carried thirty-ought-six, bolt-action deer rifles, and twelve-gauge shotguns. Carrying his .22, my brother, eight years old when the sneak attack occurred, got to tag along with an uncle. From the bluffs they scanned the Pacific with binoculars, watching for enemy submarines or even an invasion force. They were ready to give the Imperial Japanese Navy what-for.

At a young age, I was taught respect for firearms, especially “Treat every gun as if it is loaded” and “Never point a gun at anyone unless you intend to kill him.”

Nearly everyone I knew had guns — rifles, shotguns, and pistols — and it seemed as natural to me as having a pair of pliers, a saw, or a hammer. We could buy guns by mail order. Surplus M1 Garands went for \$50. We bought ammunition at the local sporting goods store or at the market. At the latter, the ammunition could be found on the same shelves as the can openers, long-stem wooden matches, and twine. The market would occasionally get large quantities of ammo and sell it as a loss-leader. Can you imagine that in the display advertising pages of your newspaper today! One time I got several thousand rounds of .22 long rifle ammo at half the normal price. This was great because we’d drive out to the desert and shoot *at* jackrabbits all day. We rarely hit the speedsters, which made the sport all the more intriguing.

We had a rifle range, Hutton’s, nearby in Topanga Canyon. It was good for sighting-in your rifle and for target practice. Older shooters were always ready to offer friendly advice. The range master there also sternly reinforced every lesson you had ever learned about safe handling of firearms. So, too, did the Boy Scouts. One could earn a Merit Badge for Marksmanship. Requirements for the badge included not only scoring sufficiently high when shooting at targets in both the standing and prone positions but also a knowledge of the mechanics of firearms, proper cleaning of guns, and a thorough understanding of the Boy Scout Marksman’s Code, which focused on safety. In a sense, earning the Merit Badge simply taught boys what many generations of American kids had learned by virtue of growing up in our land.

Guns are more American than apple pie. Johnny Appleseed didn’t bring his nurseryman’s stock of seeds and apple trees west of the Appalachian Mountains until 1805. He was a generation or two behind Daniel Boone and others carrying their Kentucky rifles. Children were reared on guns, not pie. Did this have terrible consequences? Hardly. It produced the men who fought at Lexington and Concord, the Second Battle of Saratoga, Horseshoe Bend, New Orleans, the Alamo, and San Jacinto. It produced the Bear Flaggers. We could do worse than to rear our sons to become such men, who for generations have guaranteed us our freedom, independence, and liberty. ■



In Pacific Palisades we celebrated the Bear Flaggers and our frontier days. Everyone dressed in period costume, and the boys were armed with cap pistols. That’s me at three years old (circled) wearing a slouch hat, suspenders, blue jeans, and boots.