



# FRONTIERSMAN'S FRIEND

*Derek Landers* looks at the Pedersoli Missouri River Hawken Rifle

Long before Horace Greely is supposed to have advocated "Go West, Young Man" (there is no hard evidence that he ever said this), pioneers had been moving from America's most populated area, east of the Mississippi River, for two or three decades. Lured by the prospect of large areas of unclaimed land, or vast riches from the California gold fields, intrepid adventurers were willing to endure the hardship of a journey lasting three or four months, over uncharted territory, while facing unknown hardships.

One of the jumping-off points, where civilisation as they knew it would be left behind, was St. Louis, Missouri. It was here that the travellers could stock up on provisions and supplies for the trip. Mindful of the need to hunt game and the strong possibility that they would meet hostile Indians, foremost among their needs was a good rifle. Fortunately, St. Louis was home to several gunmakers, among whose number were the shops of Jacob and Samuel Hawken.

## A family affair

The brothers were born and raised in Maryland, where they were trained as gunsmiths under the tuition of their father, before moving to Missouri in the early years of the 19th century. Initially operating as separate ventures, when Jacob's partner, James Lakenan, died in 1825, the two brothers joined forces as J&S Hawken, primarily repairing and modifying Pennsylvania-type long guns that were the predominant fashion of the

day. Taking note of the needs of the frontiersmen, the Hawkens were soon able to manufacture a rifle of their own, which would stand up to the rigours of life on the frontier, with the first known example dating from 1823. Doubtless, a number of the passing emigrants would be swayed by the growing reputation of the two brothers and would choose a Hawken rifle to accompany them on their Westward travels.

Each rifle was made to the customer's specifications, rather than putting guns 'on the shelf', with the guns being shorter and of larger calibre than the 'Kentucky' rifles from which they were descendants. The shorter length made them more manageable on horseback and the larger calibre enabled hunters to bring down larger animals, such as buffalo and grizzly bears. Octagonal barrels made of cast steel, measuring around 33 to 36", were popular and the favoured calibres were .50" or .53", although some versions reached .68". They were

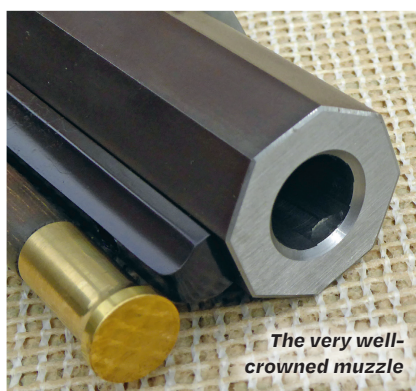
generally half-stocked in walnut or maple, but some full-stock examples are known, and double set triggers were the norm. Weights varied from around 10 lbs, with some examples tipping the scales at around 15 lbs.

The Hawken 'Rocky Mountain' rifles gained a reputation for quality and accuracy, and a number of prominent citizens were owners of these guns, including Kit Carson and Jim Bridger. Jacob Hawken died in 1849 and Samuel carried on with the business for another six years before retiring and passing the reins to his son, William. Samuel passed away in 1884 at the age of 92. During the early years of the business, they also repaired tools and manufactured brass axes, tomahawks, and gun worms.

## A Hawken from Italy

There are only a few examples of original Hawken rifles around today, and those are in museums or private collections. However, for those wishing to engage themselves in a period of American history, help is at

Decent case colours on the lock

Set triggers and the adjustment screw  
(photo courtesy D. Pedersoli)

The very well-crowned muzzle

hand from European firearms manufacturers. Davide Pedersoli of Italy has been producing faithful replicas of long guns, both American and European, for several decades. Their catalogue includes examples from early flintlocks, through percussion, to large calibre breech loaders of the late 19th century. It is no surprise then that we find the name 'Hawken' among their products, and the Henry Krank website shows several models to choose from. Guns are offered in both flintlock and percussion styles, plus left-handed shooters are also catered for, although these models may need to be ordered with the possibility of a long wait.

The model we have here is the Missouri River percussion version, with a walnut stock and chambered in .50 calibre. It's a no-frills-looking rifle with a brown, matte-finished octagonal barrel sat in a walnut half-stock (maple is an option at extra cost). There is an extra rib – also brown – screwed to the bottom of the barrel, on to which are fastened the pipes for the wooden ramrod. Other than the triggers and screws, the rest

of the metalwork has a case-coloured finish, the brightest of which is on the trigger guard. The edges are all crisp and the general fit of parts is very good, although there are one or two very small gaps in wood-to-metal areas. The barrel is held on to the forend of the stock by four wedges that pass through slots in the under-barrel bar. A nice touch was to see the screws holding the wedge escutcheons in place all lined up with their slots horizontally, which is reminiscent of high-end firearms.

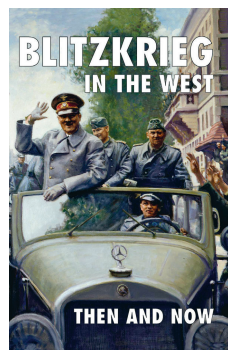
The sights are more or less standard for these guns, with the rear being a semi-buckhorn, on a rather long and fancier-than-usual base. The elevation is variable via a sliding, stepped elevator, and the base is dovetailed into the barrel, and held by a screw. Loosening the screw allows the sight to be moved left or right for windage. At the muzzle end is a sail-shaped blade (white metal) that's sat in a base. This is also dovetailed into the barrel flat and can be moved

## BOOKSHELF



**TITLE:** Battle of Malta  
**AUTHOR:** Anthony Rogers  
**PUBLISHER:** Osprey, Oxford  
**ISBN:** 9781472848901  
**PRICE:** £14.39  
 The onslaught unleashed against the island of Malta during the timespan covered in this well-researched and

nice presented work has been the subject of many books. This single volume is different because it's tightly written and sticks to the facts, with no deviation away from the subject at hand. A brief historical introduction is followed by short biographies of the opposing commanders, before outlining the strategic importance of the island to the Allies as a military base. Most of this will already be known to some readers, but it's always good to recap certain things. He covers the famous convoys which helped bring the island back from the brink. Malta's position was parlous but the resolve of the civilians and the determination of the British and Allied forces to prevent its loss is covered here, and their stoicism has to be admired. Great history well told and an all-around excellent read.



**TITLE:** Blitzkrieg in the West - Then and Now  
**AUTHOR:** Jean Paul Pallud  
**PUBLISHER:** After the Battle  
**ISBN:** 9780900913686  
**PRICE:** £50.00

Even to a general reader, the term 'Blitzkrieg' requires no explanation. It's an expression that most people know, even if they do not fully understand the tactics involved. The depth of research required to produce this masterful work, which first appeared in 1991, has produced a book of undoubted importance, which is vital to any historian studying WWII. As the subtitle says, it is a 'Then and Now' comparison history, and over the intervening 30 years much has changed. Much more has changed since 1940, but the author uses images from back then and presents them with more recent images. However, it's his text that puts weight into the work, and the mention of the smaller actions, the myriad of which have become overshadowed by the bigger battles. Anyone thinking about a self-guided tour of the 1940 battlefields would do well to have a copy of this.



No frills, but a good looker



Detail of the cheekpiece, note minor gaps in the wood-to-metal fit



The rear sight has a long base

from side to side. The top tang is drilled and tapped to allow the fitting of one of the many optional rear sights available from Pedersoli and others.

**Get set**

The grip is very comfortable, aided by the fancy tail on the trigger guard, and a raised cheekpiece on the left-hand side of the stock. The length of pull is just about perfect for me, at a shade under 14".

The lock uses a double set trigger arrangement, with a large, curved rear trigger. This is pulled first to 'set' the front trigger, which then requires a very light touch to drop the hammer. The setting on this was excellent out of the box, with just enough pressure to stop it from going off as soon as you touched it, so I left it as it was. For those who wish to alter this to their own preference, there is a screw between the two triggers for adjustment.

The butt is capped off with a deep, crescent-shaped steel plate (apparently Hawken did not use brass, although there are examples in today's catalogue) that extends over the top of

the butt. A separate plate is screwed to the underside of the butt, presumably to protect this end of the woodwork in harsh frontier use back in the day.

**Will do the business**

For a 4ft long gun, the Hawken is surprisingly well-balanced, but at 9 lbs +, I would not want to carry it around for too long. I tried a couple of offhand shots, but this was never going to be the best option, so the rest of the shooting was done from a bench with a rest. Looking back, it might be fun to try the crossed-sticks method next time I have something like this to play with.

I had some phials loaded with 50-grains of Henry Krank medium black powder and used a round lead ball of .495" diameter clothed in a .005" lubricated patch, set off with Remington percussion caps. I had decided beforehand to wipe the barrel after every shot, principally to make loading subsequent charges that bit easier, but also to see if it improved accuracy.

The first shot was about 3" from the centre of the target, at eight o'clock, which was not

bad for a starter, I thought. The recoil was very mild, and the set trigger was a delight to use. The second shot ended up almost touching the first, so I went for a 3-shot group before adjusting the sights. The third shot ended up 5" away at three o'clock. Might have been the wind!

Over the next couple of hours, the 3-shot strings averaged a little under 4". I had not prepared any other powder charges, so couldn't see if more powder would have made a difference. There are those out there who will be able to wring a lot more out of this rifle with a bit of experimentation, and I was content that the gun could perform well in the right hands. I had to use my own steel ramrod, as the wooden one supplied has a threaded female end, and all of my accessories also have female fittings, so no mate-up. The wipe-after-every-shot regime is definitely the way to go for ease of loading. There are more Hawken options in the Henry Krank catalogue, although at the time of writing many are out of stock. **GM**

**TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION**

- Name:** Pedersoli Hawken Missouri River
- Calibre:** .50"
- Barrel Length:** 30"
- Overall Length:** 47"
- Weight:** 9¼ lbs
- Length of Pull:** 13¾"
- Price:** £1141.00
- Contact:** Henry Krank - [www.henrykrank.com](http://www.henrykrank.com)