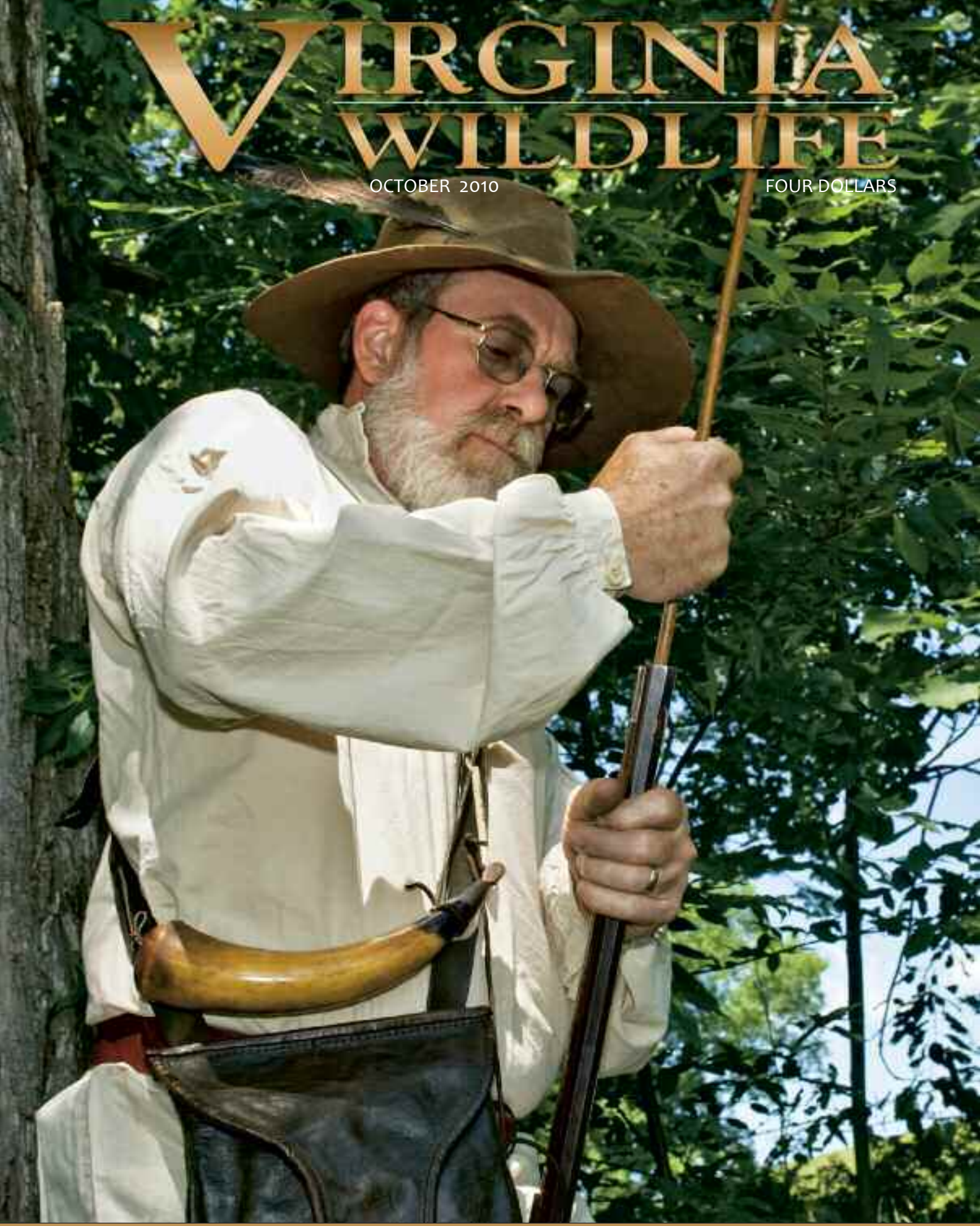
VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

OCTOBER 2010 FOUR DOLLARS



A Whimbrel's Journey • Accotink Bay • Brookies in Stony Creek

Crafting a Connection to History

story by Clarke C. Jones • photos by Dwight Dyke

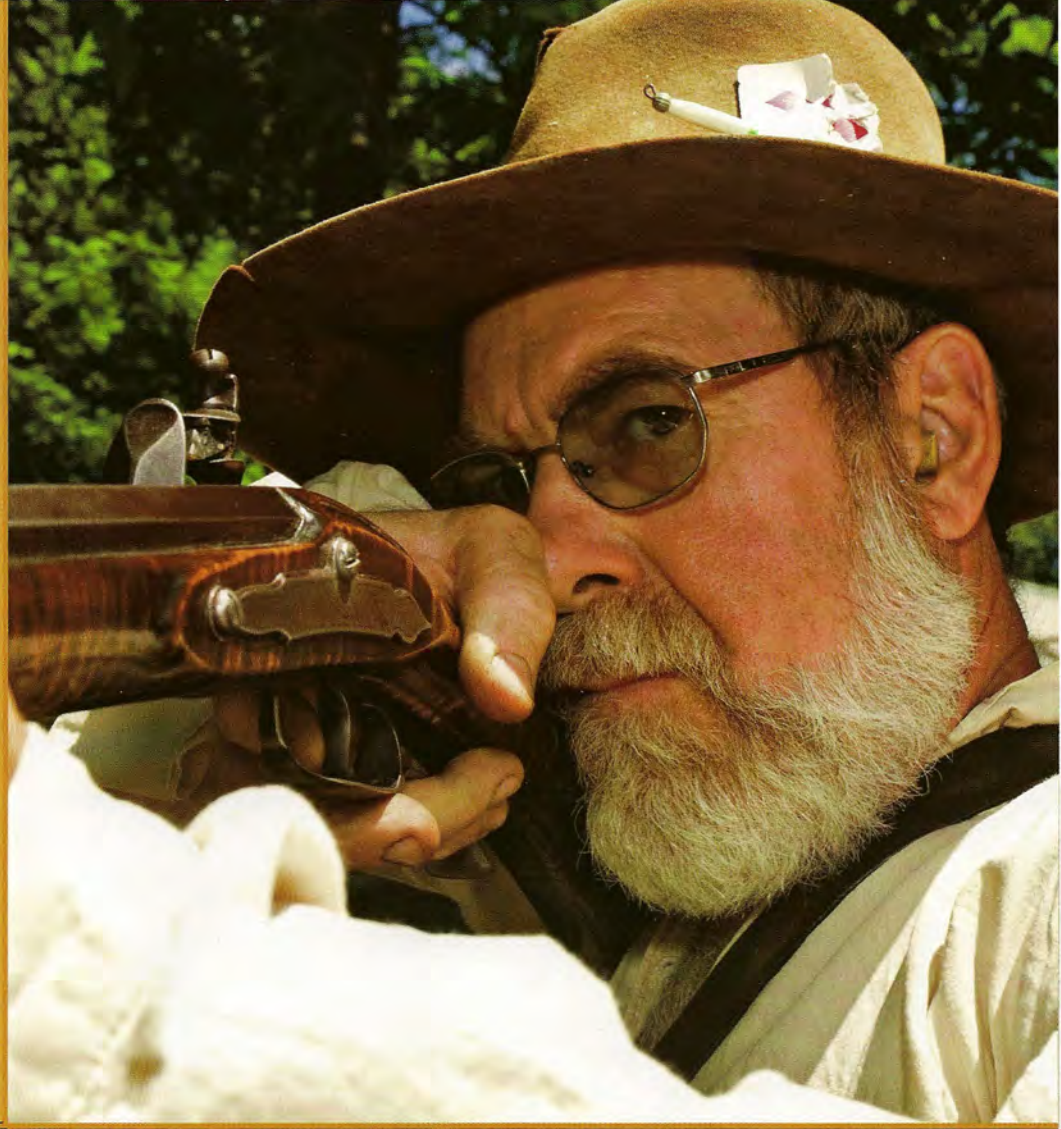
His hands trembled slightly as young Caleb Rutledge quickly tried to reload his long gun. It would not be the first time a deer had been knocked down, only to get up and run again. He thought his aim was true, but with all the smoke from the black powder he couldn't be sure. What he was sure of, though, was that finding a buck in the rapidly fading sunlight, even one that may have only run a hundred yards, would not be easy. In the middle to late 1700s, a boy was expected to do a man's work, and Caleb's job was to help supply meat to the tiny settlement of Martin's Station, which lay along the Wilderness Road—an area that many years later would become Lee County, Virginia. It was with a certain amount of pride that he carried his father's flintlock. He had proven his skills with this handmade weapon two years ago and was considered a valued member of this remote outpost.

Caleb moved quickly and quietly toward his quarry, only to find splotches of blood where he had sighted the deer. The deer had been hit and, judging from the amount of blood, could not have gone far. Just as he started to track the animal, he heard the hurried steps of something coming

towards him—then stop. The woods became too quiet. Suddenly, a squirrel barked a warning and Caleb knew instantly it would not be the deer. Crouching behind a large hemlock, he slowly peeked around it to see what it might be, and almost stopped breathing. Standing over the slain deer were three Indians, wearing paint.

Caleb didn't know whether they were Muscogee or Cherokee. It really didn't matter. What he *did* know was that they would not be this far east unless there was trouble. Most of them had moved to Kentucky with the signing of the latest treaty. However, not every Colonial knew just where the latest Indian borders were, and some of those who did just didn't care. He also knew it was not the deer that piqued their interest. If he was younger, the Indians might take him captive and raise him as their own. But any settler who was old enough to shoot deer was a threat and he had heard how Indians dealt with threats.

The three Indians said nothing, but with hand signals split up in three different directions. Caleb knew it would not be long before they found him and moved in the only direction left open



Lowell Haarer takes aim with one of his creations, above. Left, he primes the gun by putting a little powder in the flash pan. That aids in setting off the explosion needed to propel the shot or bullet.

to the young boy. If he could get back to the path that led to the settlement before the Indian scouts found it, he might have a chance. But if they found the path first, at least one of them would be concealed alongside to watch whoever might use it. Staying low and walking in a painfully slow squat, Caleb inched toward the path when suddenly a loud "WHOOP!" rang out. Caleb had been flushed! Now it was a footrace down the path and to the settlement. As Caleb darted around a bend, two tall figures blocked his way. He hesitated for a second when a voice cried out, "Keep a com'n boy! We ain't got all day!"

Caleb ran around the two men. The Indians rounded the same bend and two flintlocks sent a volley toward them. Seconds later, four more feet joined Caleb's, and the three of them made a hasty retreat to Martin's Station. "It's the flintlock they want," one of the settlers uttered. "If it looks like you are not going to make it, drop it and keep running."

And so unfolded one of my childhood dreams. Many of those dreams included colorful scenarios tied to a particular weapon I was fascinated with at the time; in this case, the long rifle.

The highly prized long rifle flintlock, also known as the Pennsylvania or Kentucky rifle, replaced the matchlock system for firing a gun and was considered a weapon of high technology by both Indians and early settlers. It is still in demand

today, not only by reenactors and those who do black powder hunting, but also by those who appreciate handmade craftsmanship that becomes a work of art.

One of these craftsmen is Lowell Haarer, of Linville, whose quest to make authentic handmade flintlocks may have been divine intervention. Haarer, a part-time minister at Zion Hill Mennonite Church, met his wife Mim at Rosedale Bible College. While on their honeymoon in Colonial Williamsburg, he viewed a documentary film on gun-making at the visitor center which inspired him to start crafting his own flintlocks. Lowell constructed his first flintlock in 1985, but at that time making flintlocks was more of a hobby for the former cabinetmaker. About five years ago, Haarer decided to change his avocation into his vocation.

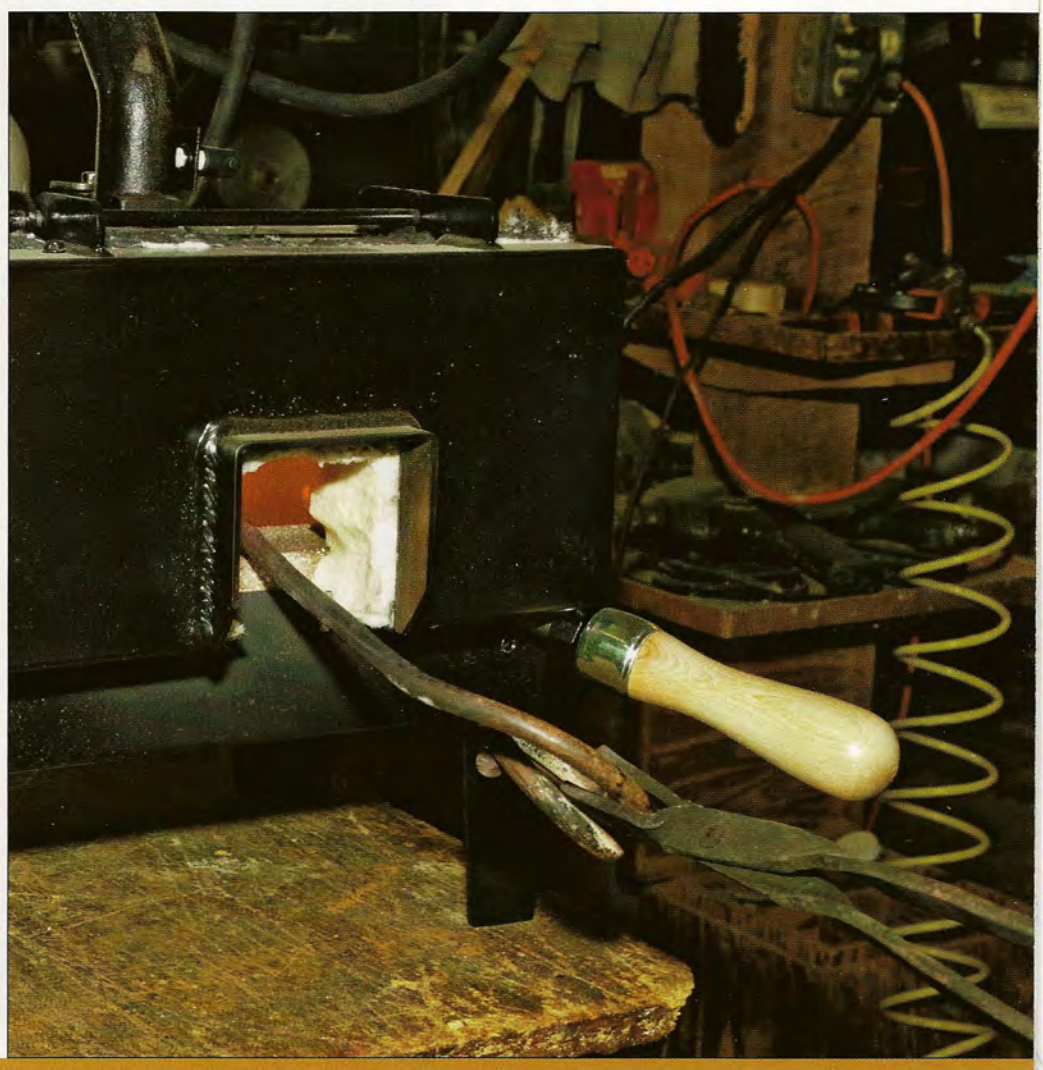
"It takes anywhere from 150 to 180 hours for me to make a flintlock rifle, depending on the detail, style, and whether I also hand-forge the firing mechanisms of the flintlock. I can make just about every piece of the flintlock, but I normally purchase the barrel, and some of the locks." He

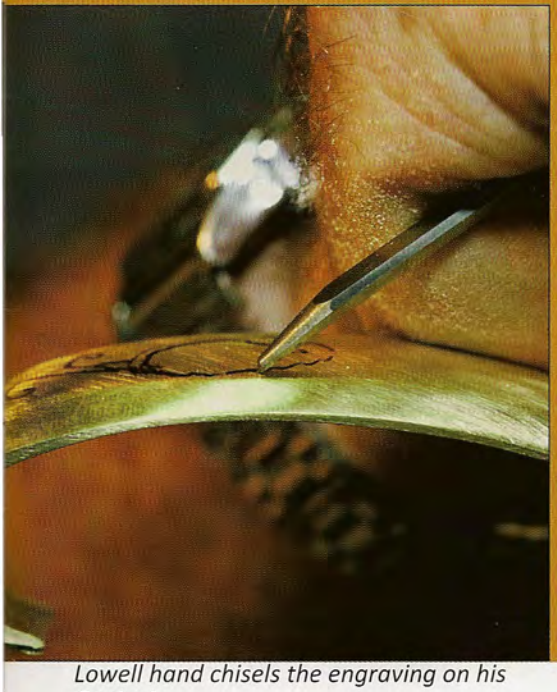
The trigger mount and flint locking device are ready to be added to the rifle.

added, "I do all the relief work on the wood with tools I make, as well."

Lowell uses a lathe to cut the pattern of the stock from a block of wood. Then with saws, chisels, rasps, and files the wood is removed down to its final size. He likely will choose a piece of curly maple, walnut, or cherry, because he believes those woods are the most durable. Lowell has two types of forges: coal and gas. Although more economical, the coal forge takes a while to reach optimum temperature, so he uses the gas forge when quick heat is needed for a short time, such as to bend a casting or temper springs. After much of the work is completed, the long, slender forend (the wooden part that lies underneath the barrel) is then produced to attach to the barrel. This wooden piece adds to the beauty of a flintlock and is only 1/16 of an inch in thickness! It is Lowell's attention to historical detail in every flintlock he produces which makes his work stand out. Although flintlocks were built for two centuries, Haarer's guns are from the period of 1770 to 1790.

One of the key pieces in making a flintlock work, of course, is flint. "In colonial days flint was shipped from





Lowell hand chisels the engraving on his flintlocks.

Top, both a gas and a coal forge (shown) are used by the gunmaker. Above, Haarer cuts out the stock pattern for his next flintlock.

Europe. Native flint, like the Indians used for arrowheads, can be found here; however, it does not last very long in a flintlock. "English flint is much better," related Haarer.

"Repeated firing dulls the sharpened edge of the flint, so it needs to be knapped, which is sharpening by breaking off a piece of the front edge of the flint. This is done with a knapping hammer which the shooter carries in his shooting bag," he explained. A shooting bag was an essential item a hunter or soldier would carry to utilize a flintlock. In it he packed extra flint, balls or shot, lubricated patches that acted as wadding, a priming flask, a touch hole pick, and other miscellaneous tools required to keep a flintlock operational.

Haarer's flintlocks are available in various calibers. "The .45 caliber is great for target shooting because of good velocity with very manageable recoil. I am building more guns in the .54 to .62 caliber range because they pack more punch for deer hunting," the gunmaker explained. However, according to Haarer, the .50 caliber seems to represent the best of both worlds and is used often.

It is remarkable how Haarer produces such beautiful and useful works of art from his small shop in Linville; he utilizes every inch of space. Although many people first glimpse Lowell's masterful craftsmanship at rendezvous or living history events, or through the internet, or at gun shows, Lowell thinks that word-of-mouth is still the way most of them find out about his flintlocks. People must be talking because Haarer's flintlocks have not only found their way to Virginians but also to flintlock aficionados in Ohio, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Although today it may be thought of as an obsolete hunting tool, in its time the flintlock was a significant technical innovation and could be considered one of the forerunners of all guns used today. Obviously, Virginians and many others recognize its beauty and appreciate the skill and patience that artisan Lowell Haarer dedicates to conserve this aspect of America's history. □

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Lab, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

A flintlock in action! It's important to wear eye protection when shooting any gun.