



Story By
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MORE THAN A FLASH IN THE PAN GUNSMITH TIM MITCHELL

Guns—in Montana, we own them, we use them, and we'll fight for the right to keep them. Though we may know how to use them, few of us ever build the guns we own. Tim Mitchell of Marion, Montana, builds guns, but not just any guns—only muzzle-loaders. From flintlocks to percussions, Tim builds for individual owners and for movies, such as *The Alamo* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Tim builds historically accurate, fully functional guns. If Tim builds it—it works. As he says, “You don’t hang ‘em on a wall—you use them.” This holds true for any gun Tim has built for the movies. Nowadays, cinematographers strive for authenticity, using technical advisors and gun coaches. They also require three working gun models so they always have a backup.

For Tim, it all started in 1969. He was living in California at the time and thought he might like to make knives. Tim was a carpet-layer but had always been interested in guns and knives. So when a friend of Tim’s was going to hock a muzzle-loader, Tim bought it for \$50. The more he looked at it, the more interested he became, and he thought... *I could do this*. And he could. In the 37 years Tim has been building guns, there have only been about two weeks that he didn’t have a gun to make.

Around 1973, Tim joined the National Association of Primitive Riflemen. Not just about guns, the association also hosts rendezvous, primitive living in tepees, and dressing the part in historically accurate costumes. Tim was also a member of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association (NMLRA), which has been reviving interest in muzzle-loading rifles since the 1930s. Many of the founding members were friends of Sergeant York of WWI fame.



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lar Colt, made as a gift for the Sultan of Turkey. The cost of such a gift is not as outrageous as it appears. For centuries, as recent as the 20th century, guns were often given to honor a foreign ruler or country—a tradition harkening back to the time when only royalty or landed gentry were allowed to own guns.

For the movie *The Alamo*, Tim built a double-barrel flintlock shotgun for the character Colonel Travis. For *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*, Tim worked on two pistols. He was given carved reproductions that he fancied up with wire inlay and engraving, authentic to the 1760 period. His task for *Pirates of the Caribbean 3* was a bit more daunting—a side-by-side double-barrel flintlock blunderbuss. Tim was sent a picture of an original from the 1790–1800 era and was asked to build a model from 40 years earlier (1740–1750). Tim changed the locks and the “furniture”—the trigger guards, thimbles, and butt plate—to make it authentic to the 1740–1750 era. To be historically accurate, the gun and the “furniture” must be from the same time period. Gunsmiths determine the window of accuracy by the time it takes for guns to evolve, which is about every 20 to 30 years.

For anyone who knows guns, it is easy to recognize their origin. Each country, as well as its regions, has a distinct style that can be seen in the engraving, carving, and overall shape of a gun. Similarly, each gunsmith’s workmanship is so unique that you can identify the maker of any gun—down to even the gunsmith’s apprentice.

Tim builds black powder guns with either percussion or flintlock ignition systems. Essentially, any muzzle-loader uses black powder—loaded in the muzzle (with a patch ball) rather than in the breach. The difference between flintlock and percussion is in the ignition system. In a flintlock system, a flint strikes against a frizzen (a hardened piece of steel), creating a spark in a pan that is positioned next to a touchhole that goes into the barrel, where the powder is for the main charge. In a percussion ignition, there is no flint or frizzen. Instead, a drum with a nipple is located on the outside of the barrel. The drum has a copper cap (percussion cap) with fulminated mercury, which, when hit, ignites and shoots a flame into the barrel. Intriguingly, children’s cap guns are based on the percussion system, without the flame of course.

In 1979, Tim and his wife, Rae, and their two daughters moved to Montana. They still live in a log home that Tim and Rae helped build, which houses his shop and includes a separate outbuilding for the forge.

To say that Tim is an anachronism wouldn’t be quite correct. Could he live comfortably and ably in the late 1800s? Absolutely! He has even constructed a historically correct frontier village. Taking more than 10 years to build, ostensibly for use as a movie set, it is more accurately a symbol of Tim’s love affair with that era. However, Tim is definitely a contemporary man with a sheer love of guns and the American history those guns have forged.

Building a gun requires a wide variety of skills: blacksmithing, woodworking, foundry (casting in brass, crafting silver inlays, making barrels), woodcarving, and engraving. In early America, the most important man in any community was generally the blacksmith. If you needed a tool, he made it, as well as anything else you might need. A good number of blacksmiths also built guns, some even becoming full-time gunsmiths. In the 18th and 19th centuries, most guns were made by gunsmiths with the help of an apprentice, who received only room and board in exchange for seven years of indentured servitude. Tim has the knowledge, the ability, and the skill to make an entire gun by hand.

Today, Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia is one of the few places in the world where guns and all the tools required to build them—from the screws down to the barrels—are built completely by hand, with absolutely no use of power tools. The price is approximately \$20,000 for a handmade gun. In order to keep prices more affordable, the majority of gunsmiths will make about four or five parts, depending on the gun, and they use pre-made parts when possible. For example, a flintlock made by a well-known gunsmith can cost up to \$2,000 for the part alone. It all boils down to the gun, the purchaser, and the acceptable price. The most expensive gun on record is a 5-million-dol-

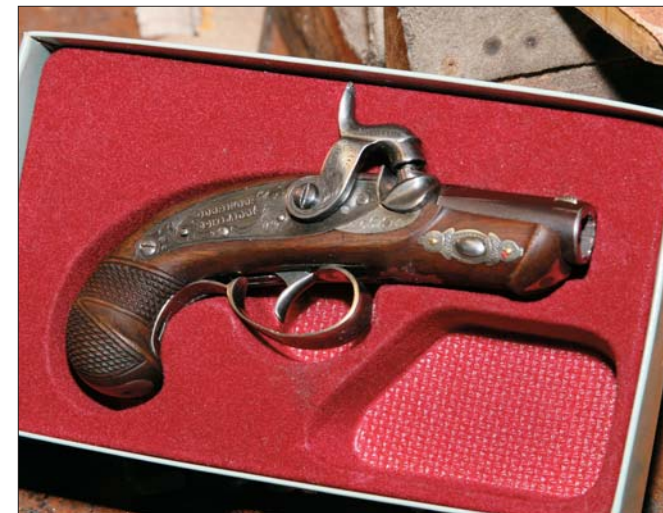


Photo by Dean Hazuka

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It is Tim's belief that the first true American art form is the Kentucky long rifle—a muzzle-loader originally called the Pennsylvania long rifle, owing its name change to the War of 1812. At the time, the British were using shorter, heavier guns of 50 and 60 calibers with smooth-bore barrels, accurate from 50 to 60 yards. In America, we extended and rifled the barrel to achieve more accuracy, and reduced the caliber. With the Pennsylvania rifle, you could hide behind a tree and be accurate to 200 yards. In the War of 1812, there were 2,000 British deaths for every 6 American deaths. The British went home and talked about the superiority of American guns. And in America, the poem "The Longhunters of Kentucky" (about General Jackson and his Kentucky backwoodsmen) changed the name from the Pennsylvania to the Kentucky long rifle—politics and public relations at work.

Tim's dream is to build an English rifle with a Damascus barrel—English because of the clean lines, carving, simple shapes, and workmanship, and Damascus because there is a myriad of patterns you can make by laminating iron and steel and then polishing and etching to create the final pattern. We hope that if he ever builds his English rifle with the Damascus barrel, he won't stop building guns for those of us who admire and wish to keep historically accurate American guns in our lives.

In Montana, Tim builds guns, sells guns, gives away guns, will fight for your right to keep those guns, and yet...owns not a single gun he has ever made. 📍

