

Fort Recovery Gunsmith

by

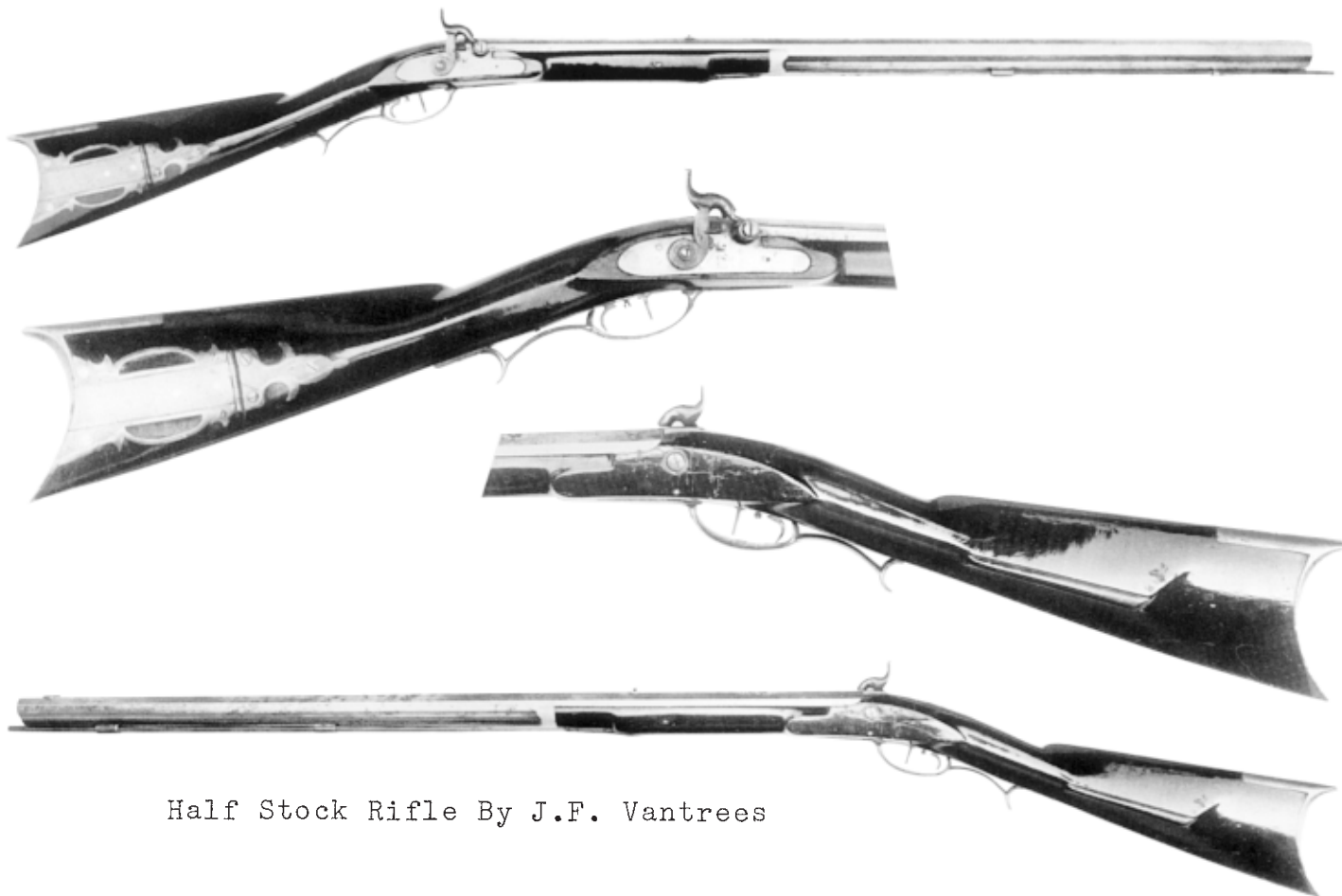
Robert V. Van Trees

Wise King Solomon could have selected no one more trustworthy to guard the temple treasures than today's owner of a small piece of tempered steel used by James Frederick Vantrees to mark the half-stock and full-stock single shot percussion rifles he made in the 1854-1890 period. A prized possession and one entrusted to the care of a great-grandson, Junior Floyd Van Trees of Fort Recovery, Ohio owns the steel die used by the Fort Recovery gunsmith to stamp his rifles with "J.F.Vantrees." On the banks of the Wabash where General St. Clair suffered a murderous defeat November 4, 1791--a carnage that prompted the first congressional investigation in the United States--Floyd, as he prefers to be called, safeguards the three inch steel stamp as if it were a prized treasure of Tutankhamen.

Contrary to the information reported on page 266 of "Gunsmiths of Ohio, 18th and 19th Centuries, Vol. I," By Donald A. Hutsler (1973), the father of J. F. Vantrees was Daniel, not J. Vantrees, and a gunsmith shop was not operated in Fort Recovery, Ohio as early as 1826 as reported in "The Arms Collector" (April, 1939). Daniel Vantrees (1807-1873), an early pioneer settler of Mercer County in western Ohio, moved from Butler County, Ohio to a farm east of Fort Recovery about 1840 bringing along his wife

(Mary Ann Downs); a daughter, Elizabeth; and two sons: Hezekiah and James F. On acreage he purchased from the U.S. Government, Daniel built a cabin, cleared the land, and raised his family of twelve children. In addition to farming, Daniel also performed blacksmith work on his farm and from 1852 to 1859 served as a Justice of Peace in Recovery Township.

Born February 26, 1838 in Butler County, Ohio, James Frederick hunted in the woods along the Wabash River three miles east of Fort Recovery and as a youth of fourteen years this second son of Daniel Vantrees, Esq. found a rotted wood box that contained nine hundred pieces of silver coin, Spanish doubloons, valued at \$14,000. Found while grubbing on an out-lot owned by Isaiah Totten, a neighbor, the incident is reported in the "History of Van Wert and Mercer Counties (1880)" and states in part: "This was supposed to be the paymaster's box of gold left at the time of St. Clair's defeat." As discussed in "Northwest Treasure," written by the writer and appearing in the MERCER COUNTY CHRONICLE (July 4 and 11, 1985), the location of the finding and contents of the wooden box appear to negate the supposition it was secreted by a member of the ill-fated expedition.



Half Stock Rifle By J.F. Vantrees

James F. made his first rifle about 1854. Bruce Van Trees, another great-grandson of the gunsmith, is the proud owner today of the rifling tools used by James F. more than a century ago.

Insofar as reports of Daniel Vantrees having been a gunsmith, to the writer's knowledge no one has a rifle claimed to have been made by that early settler or any stamped "J. Vantrees." A part-time blacksmith, Daniel taught his son the trade according to stories handed down from past generations. Having not married until 1832, and not settling on his farm near Fort Recovery until early 1840, it is unlikely Daniel made any rifles before moving to Mercer County. It is only through the ingenuity of his son in marking his rifles that posterity has provided a means of identifying the products of James F.'s crafts-

manship. Clyde E. Van Trees (1890-1980), the writer's father, often told how James F. gave the rifle stamping tool to his only son, Daniel Emerson (1865-1921), and he in turn passed it on to his eldest son, James Floyd (1886-1926), whose wife (Grace) safeguarded it after her husband's untimely death and passed it on to their only son, Junior Floyd Van Trees.

Clyde Van Trees often related how his older brother, James Floyd, would on occasion escort him and their younger brother, John Lyle (1897-1971), to the railroad track several miles north of their homestead along the Ohio-Indiana state line southwest of Fort Recovery. With understandable fascination the small boys would watch the older James Floyd swing a hammer and imprint "J. F. Vantrees" on the shiny steel rail. Under his

watchful eye the two younger brothers were occasionally allowed to use the tool to mark various pieces of iron and steel but it never escaped the sight of its guardian. With the same care J. F.'s descendant today guards this marking tool realizing the peril of it falling into the hands of someone who might employ it fraudulently, thus placing in jeopardy the value--sentimental and monetary--of rifles still to be found bearing the "J.F. Vantrees" trademark.

A story circulated some years ago indicated the marking tool used by J. F. Vantrees was given him by the government but a recent examination of the name die failed to reveal any identification markings peculiar to the U.S. Government's modus operandi of marking everything with a stock number and/or manufacturer's code. Although the details of how this gunsmith came into possession of the marking device will never be learned this side of eternity, being a blacksmith and knowledgeable of the tempering of steel, it seems logical to consider the name stamp may have been made in the Vantrees blacksmith shop near Fort Recovery and adds credence to a story related by another of J. F. Vantrees's descendants. According to the story it was an old itinerant engraver who visited his grandfather's blacksmith shop in the pre-Civil War years and traded his skilled service for food and lodging and the shoeing of his horse. Having partially flattened the end of an octagon shaped piece of bar stock steel, James shaped the shoes and shod the horse while the engraver etched "J.F. Vantrees" on the end of the wedge-shaped end of the metal. In a post-engraving tempering action J. F.'s father heated the marking device to a cherry red and then carefully



Floyd Van Trees with stamp and rifle

dipped the engraved end into a bucket of water to which he had added salt and some other substances--a procedure handed down to him from his progenitors who learned the art in Germany.

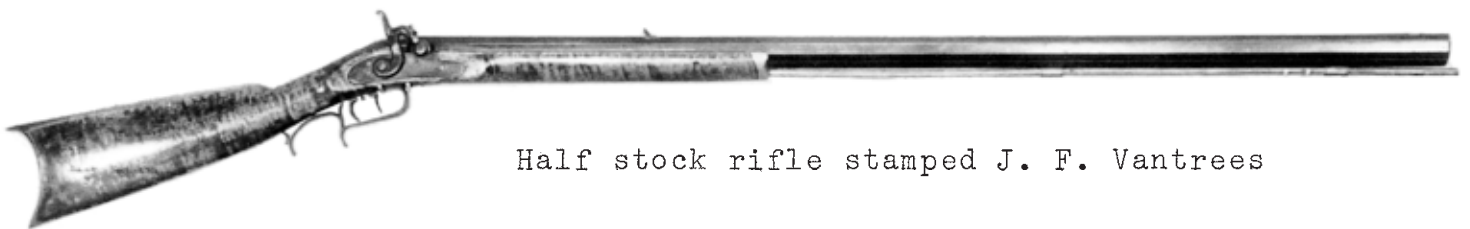
In discussing the use of such rifle and pistol marking tools a writer points out the cost of a good name die merely for identification precluded its use by the novice. The existence of the "J.F. Vantrees" stamp is evidence of his having been a "maker" of guns and not just a repairman. The barrel rifling tools used by this 19th Century gunsmith appear to indicate the items were hand made and that he rifled his barrels whether hand made or purchased. After 1835 locks, triggers, sights, barrels, escutcheons, and mountings could be readily purchased--a time consuming ordering process, but possible. The various fine wood used, as well as the sights and mountings, on rifles bearing the "J.F. Vantrees" trademark appear to support the story related by all his grandsons indicating "his

guns were made to order." The light hunting rifles made by J.F. in the post Civil War period are more elaborately decorated and may reflect the improvement in supply of purchased parts such as inlaid markings. Bruce Van Trees, and his sister Charlotte, recall their father (John Lyle) often related how James F. presented his father (Daniel Emerson) with a beautiful half-stock rifle on his 8th birthday in 1873. A prized possession, Bruce is the owner of this rifle today.

For more than ten years the writer has been involved in research of the family surname and in 1983 published a booklet appropriately called "A Decade of Digging." Among several unexplained findings is an item appearing on page 76 of "The Hunting Pouch" written by Madison Grant of Glen Mills, Pennsylvania. The Pictorial Plate (#50) includes the name "Vantrees" but the writer has been unable to identify it with any of the many charted people of this surname. Clyde E. Van Trees often told how his older brother, Floyd, often "entertained" his younger brothers--while their parents were in Fort Recovery shopping--by throwing

pinches of black powder on the kitchen stove fire. The powder was taken from a handsomely engraved powder horn that had been given their father, Daniel Emerson, by J. F. Vantrees. On one such occasion the fascinating "pffft" of the burning powder flashed and an errant spark landed on the powder horn. As Clyde would say: "It blew the horn into a million pieces. I can still see little John, still in his night shirt, standing there with his blistered face black as coal!" It was one of Clyde's favorite stories.

Today, thanks in part to the gun-collecting efforts of John Manning of Greenville, Ohio, all three of J. F.'s great-grandsons--and one great-great-grandson--are proud owners of a rifle made by their progenitor more than one hundred years ago. John Lyle Van Trees donated to the Fort Recovery Historical Society his J. F. Vantrees rifle and it is on display in the museum in that village. Other rifles made by this Fort Recovery gunsmith are to be found today but they are a scarce commodity and guarded with understandable care. □



Half stock rifle stamped J. F. Vantrees

The Vincent Saga Continued Or Uncle Cale Gets A New Home

by Wm. Reynolds

Students of the Vincent family have long speculated that Caleb Vincent established his shop at Vincent Station between the late 1860's and the time of his fathers death in 1882.

This date was based on several factors - Calebs separation from the service in 1863, his primary interest in gunsmithing as opposed to farming, his coming of age to be on his own, and the rarity of signed J. Vincent & Son rifles which indicate a short working relationship. (Some say there were father & son disagreements.) Simply many of us believed Caleb was anxious to get off the farm and establish a shop in town.

While reading through some mundane genealogical materials at the museum, I came across a new addition to the library, Letters to Pamela, A collection of family letters, 1854-1917, Edited by Harold J. Soeters and Dorothy L. Soeters. The title didn't seem to tie into anything that seemed particularly interesting, but thumbing through I noticed some of the letters were postmarked Vincent, Ohio.



Caleb Vincents shop photographed in 1950. This building was occupied until the 1960's when it was demolished. Vincents home is located directly behind the shop and is still standing today.

Photo Reynolds Collection

It's at this point I thought I would take a closer look and stumbled onto two very relevant letters. Excerpts are as follows. From pg. 129. Letter postmarked Vincent. Dec. 2, 1894 received Economy, Macon Co., Missouri to

Mrs. Pamela McNeal from Mary M. Hartson. "Caleb Vincent has sold his farm and come here and built a large two story shop 45 ft. long and 18 wide- with office rooms to rent and is having a nice new house built which they expect to be ready to move into by Christmas."

From pg. 130. Letter post-marked Vincent. June 10, 1895, received Economy Missouri, June 12, 1895. To Mrs. Pamela McNeal from Mary M. Hartson. "Caleb Vincents have moved into

their new home here in town and are fixed up quite stylish."

Now we have unquestionable proof that Caleb Vincent remained at Rocky Point for several years after his parents death until moving to Vincent Station. The reason for this move is undoubtedly to locate closer to a more populace area and since his shop was directly across from the Rail Road Station, closer to where he could ship his rifles to Iowa and maybe Missouri.□

Vincent family reunion of 1910 at the home of Caleb Vincent. Caleb is located at the extreme right and his wife Rose Bartlett is located at the right on the second row.

Photo Reynolds Collection

Courtesy Mrs. O. W. Mitchell

