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## *Bringing German Hammer Guns Back Into the Field*

*By Stephen Westbrook*

Engraved on sidelock of the 12-gauge Franz Kettner external hammer shotgun in photograph 1 above is a wonderful scene of flushing game birds. This photograph also shows the outcome every hunter hopes for in such a situation. The game birds in the engraving are most likely hazel grouse or grey partridge; the photograph shows a ruffed grouse. The scene in the engraving probably came from the Thuringian forests at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the photograph was taken in northern Maine this past October.

There are two general conditions necessary to bring back into the field many of the century-old German hammer guns sitting in gun cabinets in the United States, a large percentage of which were brought here by returning soldiers after World War II. The first is to bring them back physically, so they are safe, reliable, and preserved for decades more of use.

This article is not about the process of bringing late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century German shotguns back to the condition they would have been in after a few years of use by the original owner, which the author will address



*Picture 1*

in a later issue. Nevertheless, the three German hammer guns depicted here are representative of what typically needs to be done.

All three required reconditioning of the wood, which was accomplished by removing the old finish; drawing out petroleum-based oils that cause deterioration and darkening of the wood; removing the oil-damaged wood; repairing cracks or other flaws commonly found behind the side locks and at the wood-metal interface in the headstock area; sanding and steaming out dents and scratches as possible while preserving the character of the gun; applying a hand-rubbed stock-oil finish; and re-cutting the checkering.

The exterior of the fluid steel barrels on the Franz Kettner hammer gun required an expected level of reconditioning for a gun of its age. This was done at Back in Time, LLC by raising dents, sanding out pits, and re-bluing using the Belgian rust-blue process. The Bernard-Damascus steel barrels of the Georg Knaak 16-gauge hammer gun in picture 2 below were advanced technology and expensive in the 1870s. Despite the gold inlay on the barrels, which should have been a clear sign that this was a quality gun deserving of proper maintenance, the barrels had been allowed to deteriorate badly. They required significant metal work before being refinished to their present condition using a process of browning and etching (see picture 3 below).

The master gunsmiths who produced the 16-gauge hammer gun in picture 4, which has rare acid-etched fine-Damascus steel barrels, will never be known. But the beauty of the barrels probably is what caused them to be properly maintained, thus requiring little work except replacement of some of the missing platinum inlay. The bores of all three guns benefitted from light to moderate honing, which was possible because barrel wall thicknesses were well above commonly accepted safety standards.

The second necessary condition to bring such guns back to the field is the motivation to use them for their intended purpose, which was to hunt. Sports such as skeet and sporting clays that dominate shotgun shooting today did not exist when these guns were manufactured. Because of the adoption of new high-pressure powders, by World War I most shotguns with Damascus steel, twist steel, and other forms of laminated steel barrels had been pulled from the field and came to be viewed only as artifacts of an earlier age.

Moreover, by then hammer shotguns, at least in the United States, had lost popularity among hunters

to hammerless double guns and the new class of pump shotguns. The prohibition on lead shot for waterfowl hunting in 1991 added one more barrier, as fluid-steel-barreled hammer guns could not shoot steel shot. Fortunately, over the last decade, high-quality, reasonably-priced, factory-produced low pressure shotgun shells have become available. This includes shells with bismuth and other non-toxic soft-metal shot. Thus, these guns, when properly reconditioned, are able to experience a new life if hunters want to use them.

So why would someone want to hunt today with old hammer guns? I would propose four major reasons.

- A connection with the past, whether it be a general sense of continuity with history or something more personal, such as a distant memory of or respect for ancestors. Especially for anyone who hunts deer or turkey with a bow or a muzzle-loader, this needs little explanation. One does not have to be an antiquarian to get a good feeling when stepping back in time as one enters the woods or marsh shortly before dawn with a late 19<sup>th</sup> century hammer shotgun.
- The guns are as effective today as the day they were manufactured. When I told a few of my friends in the Virginia Vintagers that I intended to only use hammer guns on my upcoming trip to Maine to hunt ruffed grouse, some were skeptical of the potential for success. I had been hunting ducks for the previous two seasons with hammer guns, including a pre-1912 Sauer with Krupp fluid-steel barrels. However, ruffed grouse are one of the most challenging of game birds. So perhaps more to convince myself than my friends of the feasibility of my plan, I reminded them that our grandfathers and great grandfathers shot a lot of grouse with hammer guns. Moreover, low pressure shells now produced by RST Corporation in Pennsylvania for Damascus-barreled guns produce velocities of 1100 – 1200 fps. These shells have equivalent shot patterns and trajectories out to 40 yards to standard shells made by Remington or Winchester. When shooting guns with Damascus, twist, or other forms of laminated steel, always use RST or other shells that produce pressures for which the guns were designed, which is 5,000 to 7,000 psi. Standard shotgun shells typically use powder that produces 11,000 to 12,000 psi, even “light” loads.
- A greater challenge for the hunter and a fairer chase for the game. This is real, but not especially limiting

- if a hunter has practiced shooting a hammer gun under realistic conditions. Anyway, the motivation for many if not most upland game hunters is to be in the woods with your dog and the challenge of the hunt, not the tally of the number of birds killed at the end of the day. While a flushed grouse will get a split-second more time before a hunter is ready to shoot a hammer gun than a hammerless, this can be minimized with training. I prepared for the hunt by shooting sporting clays with the hammers not cocked until I saw the clay target emerge. After a while I was breaking about as many single and report-pair targets as I normally do with a hammerless gun. Simultaneous pairs were difficult, some being doable and others, at least for me, impossible. But what percentage of grouse flushes are both simultaneous and allow enough time to shoot at more than one bird before a pair reach the thick pines? In any case, with practice the shooter will bring the gun up to his or her shoulder, cocking one hammer on the way up as smoothly as taking the safety off on a hammerless gun and without distracting focus from the target. There is a method used by some to have both hammers cocked when the gun is shouldered, which is to cock both hammers with the gun still open and close it while bringing the gun up to shoot. Personally, I do not feel comfortable using this technique, especially in the field.

- Preservation. The best way to ensure preservation of most things is regular use. Most antique and vintage shotguns repaired and reconditioned at Back in Time are there because of lack of use and lack of maintenance, rather than normal wear-and-tear or misuse.

Using German hammer guns in the Maine woods made the hunt far more meaningful than it could otherwise have been, and the experience taught me a few new things about hunting with hammer guns, while reinforcing others, that I would like to share.

- The second a hunter begins to cock a hammer, he or she has taken the “safety” off. If in a hunting situation using a hammerless gun, one would not take the safety off, or even begin to cock a hammer gun.
- If after cocking a hammer gun a hunter does not get to take the shot, uncock the gun immediately.

This is obvious; we are all conditioned by practice and habit to instantly click the safety back on with a hammerless shotgun. But in the wake of the excitement of a flush, stopping and refocusing on the task of uncocking a hammer gun does not come naturally at first. Also, I found that placing a finger of the left hand over the striking surface of the hammer, while holding back the hammer and releasing the trigger tension with the thumb and trigger finger of the right hand, adds a level of safety. Hammers come forward with surprising force and can be slippery if it is raining.

- The oversized flowing trigger guards on some early German hammer guns, including two of the three guns I used, are not just stylistic. They serve the functional purpose of providing good leverage in cocking and uncocking the hammers.
- The high hammers on German hammer guns, which do not drop below the sighting plane when cocked (as is the case with many American hammer guns), may be a slight distraction to the eye on the target range at first. But they are a major asset when hunting because they facilitate fast and safe cocking.
- Focus on making the first shot count. For those of us who learned how to hunt using a single-barreled external-hammer 20-gauge shotgun bought at Montgomery Ward, there was never a temptation to rush the first shot in order to have time to fire a second shot before the bird or rabbit disappeared into the cover. Even today, having a second barrel in the event another bird flushes still seems like a luxury. But if a hunter has grown up with the expectation of being able to shoot multiple times at the same bird, slowing down and focusing on first-shot placement may take some adjustment.

The members of the German Gun Collectors Association have many things in common, including an admiration for the craftsmanship, beauty, and functionality of vintage German sporting arms. This article is not intended to highlight the guns featured or magnify one hunting experience. It is intended to promote preservation and safety, while sharing the knowledge that many magnificent external hammer shotguns can be brought back and used for their original purpose.





*Picture 2*

Georg Knaak, whose name graces this circa 1870 under lever 16-gauge, had his shop on Friedrichstrasse in Berlin near the center of the main commercial and government district. Prussia was ascendant and in the process of creating the German Empire, Bismarck was Chancellor, and the aristocratic leaders of the Prussian government and military would have dropped by enroute to their estates and hunting lodges for the weekend. The history of this gun is lost, but it certainly was made and purchased to be hunted.

It is pictured above with what is almost certainly the first grouse taken by it in at least a hundred years.

The rust on the Bernard-Damascus-steel barrels of the Georg Knaak 16-gauge was so severe as to produce wash-boarding, which was caused by the layers of iron deteriorating more significantly than the high-carbon steel. This is visible in the picture below on the left, which was taken after the grime, rust, and original browning were removed but before refinishing began. This gun could be saved (picture on the right) because the barrel walls were thick enough to allow the rust-induced ridges to be taken off and the valleys smoothed.

It would not have taken many more years of neglect for the gun to have been beyond rescue.

The transparent beauty of its acid-etched fine-Damascus steel barrels probably saved this 16-gauge under lever hammer gun, which had badly deteriorated wood and moderate pitting in the bores, from more extensive damage. After proper reconditioning, this hammer gun is again doing what it was manufactured to do by unknown 19<sup>th</sup> century German master gunsmiths.



*Picture 4*





One reason for hunting with a 19<sup>th</sup> century hammer gun is the greater challenge for the hunter and a fairer chase for the game. It will be most satisfying for hunters motivated by the challenge of the hunt and being in the woods with their dogs, not by the tally of killed birds at the end of the day. Pictured above is Ellie, an 8-year-old Boykin Spaniel who is the author's upland game and waterfowl hunting companion.



Stephen Wesbrook is a retired US Army Colonel. He led infantry soldiers at every level from a rifle platoon in the Vietnam War to a brigade at the end of the Cold War in Germany and in the Gulf War. He and his family lived for five years in Germany in the 1980s, where his youngest daughter was born. He started Back in Time, LLC in 2014 with the purpose of preserving late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century double shotguns.



## Back in Time, LLC

PRESERVING LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> & EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup>  
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