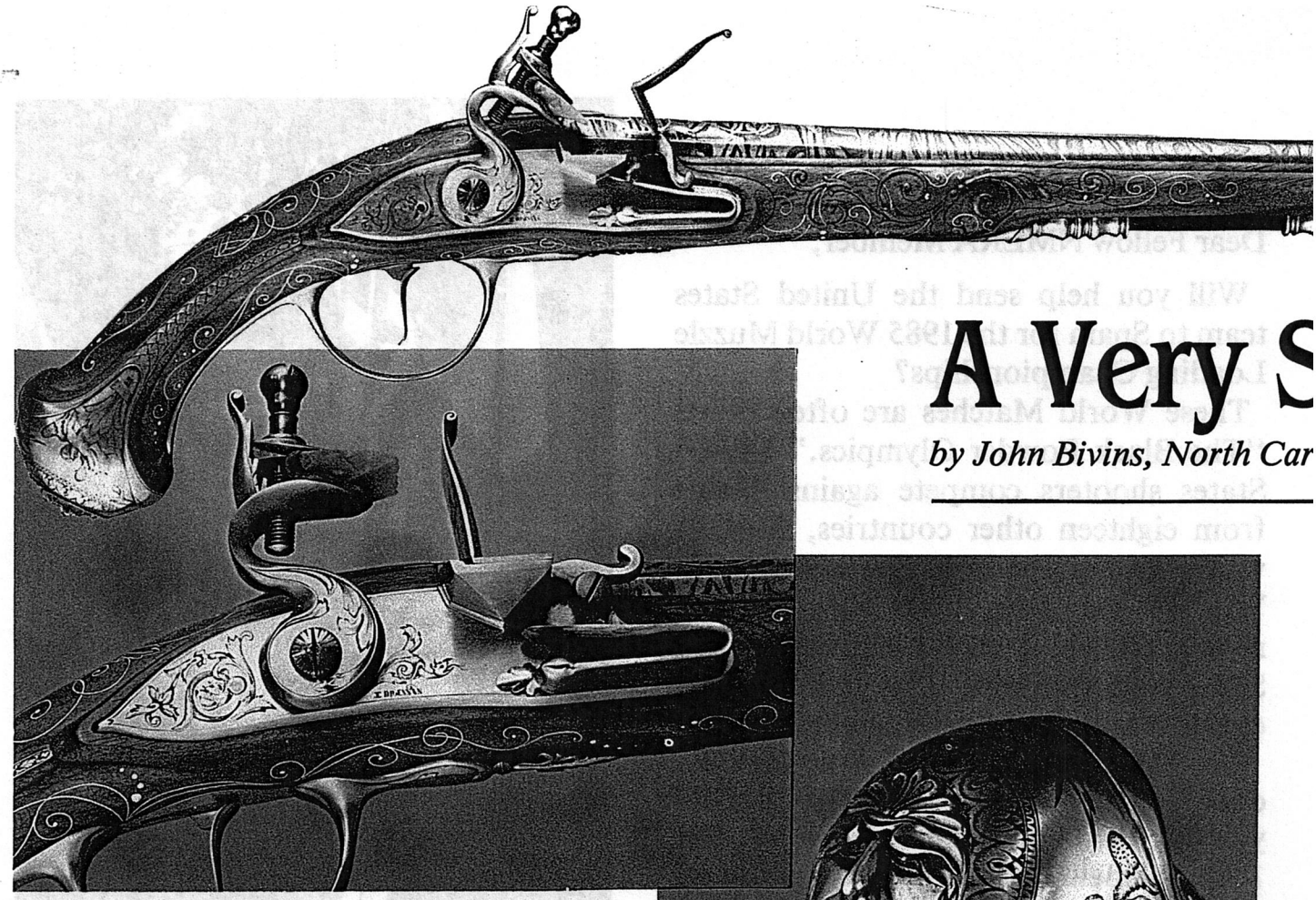


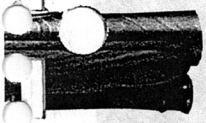
A Very S

by John Bivins, North Car

I first met Jud Brennan at Friendship about 1978, standing around Jerry Kirklin's booth jawing with a bunch of the guys. Jud sort of idled by and quietly leaned against a post, listening in, not saying much of anything. The conversation of the hour, as I recall it, was a rather arcane discussion of urban European gunmaking styles. This went on and on, as such bottomless subjects are wont to do, and Jud just stood there looking very bearded and serious. Anyone not bored silly by such a lengthy and convoluted diatribe, I figured, must have something up his sleeve. Actually, he had it tucked in his belt under his shirt: a skelp-welded pistol barrel of great length which he'd just finished, his first attempt at forging a gun barrel. That's one of the things that I like about Friendship. Someone totally unknown is forever showing up with a piece of magnificent new work, leaving all the "old hands" with their collective tails between their legs. Well, I've long since ceased to be surprised by anything that has come out of Jud Brennan's shop, whether it be an elegant and highly-finished English fowler or a worn and patinated longrifle so expertly aged that any collector might well become weak-kneed and slack-jawed at the sight of it.

The extraordinary pistol illustrated here was another Friendship teaser. It first appeared as a pattern-welded or damascus tube--the first out of Jud's shop, of course--then as a rough-stocked holster pistol. Over the course of three or four shoots, we saw the thing taking shape and finish. The pistol was a long and drawn-out affair in the making, for it was a "spec" job. That is, done on speculation, filled with the bright hope that a customer would happen along to purchase it. Such projects are the dream of virtually all custom gunmakers, but hardly anyone can imagine the nerve it takes to produce such a job, and the pecuniary strangulation that the final throes of the project inevitably bring. Consider, for instance, over 1,000 hours of labor spent, and $2,000 paid out to others for labor and materials, precisely what Jud had invested in this pistol by the time he was done with it. Not many individuals would have the fortitude to bring off a project of this magnitude without being well paid at intervals during the creation of it, but then Jud Brennan is a rather unusual fellow.

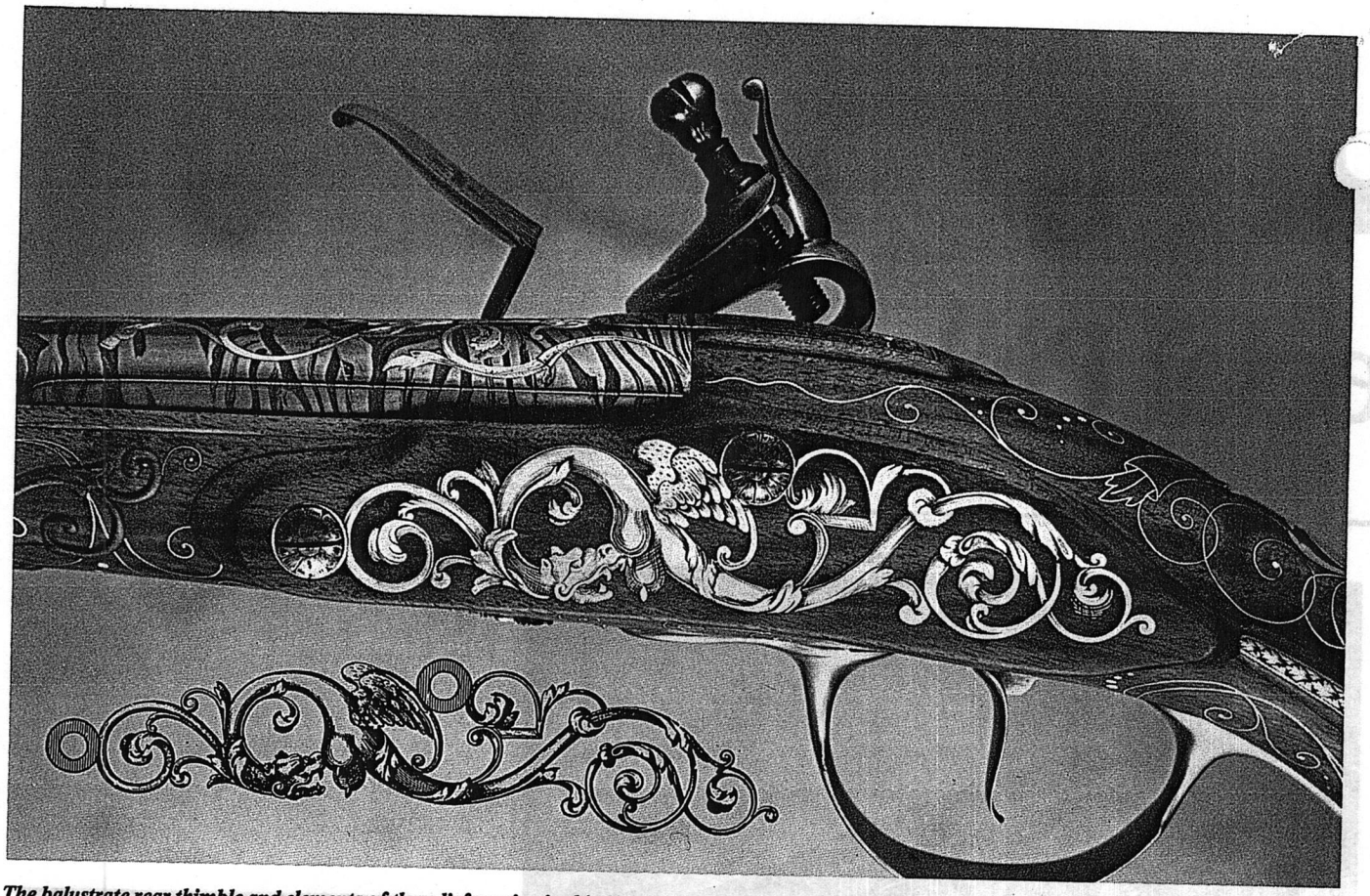
A native of Lansing, Michigan, where he is still a resident, Jud was born in 1955. After completing high



pecial Pistol

a

school, he worked at various jobs, including driving a forklift at a pickle factory, all, as Jud puts it, to pay his "gun parts bill at Roy Keeler's." Jud had become seriously interested in gunmaking by 1973, and received a good deal of encouragement from Roy, whose collection of originals served as a source of inspiration for the budding gunmaker. By 1976 Jud found that he could produce enough work to work at the trade full-time, which he determined to do. That was no small decision, since Jud and his wife Julie had married only a year before. A certain amount of dogged independence and self-sufficiency is needed to be a fulltime gunmaker; Jud admits that "being self employed" and the variety of tasks at hand in gunmaking are the things that please him most. Jud obviously has no fear of trying to learn even the most difficult procedures, for even at age 30 he has already passed any number of technological and artistic milestones that remain well ahead of most of us. It's not terribly surpris-



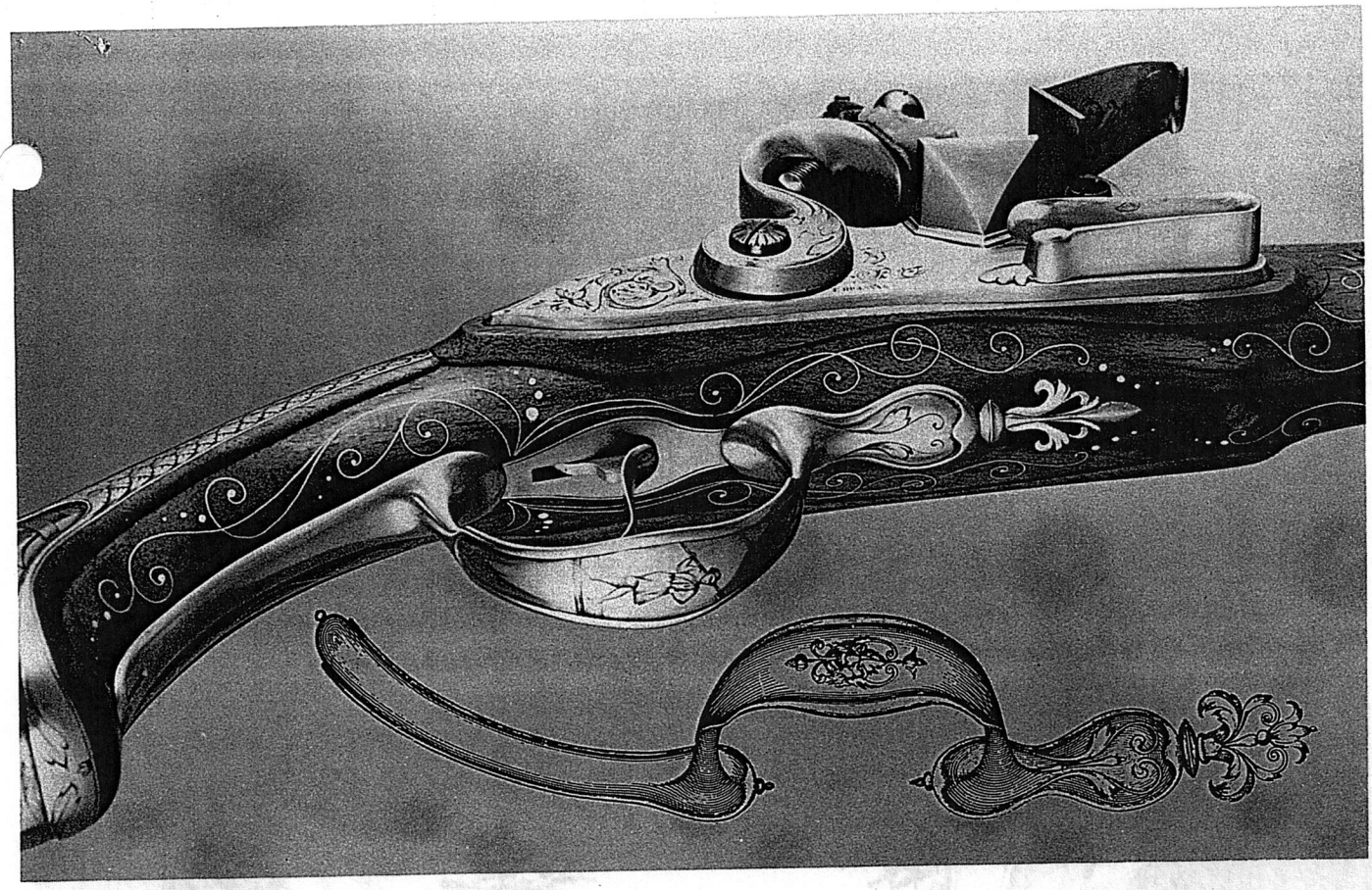
The balustrate rear thimble and elements of the relief carving in this Simonin plate were utilized by Jud in designing his pistol.

ing that Jud considers utility first and foremost in his work, no matter how elaborate it may be, since he also likes to hunt with muzzleloaders. And he's no stranger to frontier living, for that matter. He has been planning to move his family to a remote area of Alaska for a number of years now, and that sojourn seems likely in the very near future for the Brennans.

The most remarkable thing about Jud is that he really is a gunsmith in the old sense of the word. That is, he can fashion a firearm lock, stock, and barrel, and that's really a rare sort of individual in this day and time. The gunshop at Colonial Williamsburg has long been considered the Mecca of traditional gunsmithing, and we'll have a look at that fine operation and the fellows who run it in the next issue. Jud, however, never had the opportunity to apprentice himself in any aspect of the trade; instead, he taught himself, and had done so in a remarkably short length of time. Now, it's one thing to be able to forge and file gun components competently, and to stock the parts up in stylish fashion, but it's quite another to be able to do those things well and then have the delicacy of hand and eye required to execute fine Baroque decoration. Make no mistake; forge-welding a damascus barrel is heavy work, but the fellow who can do that and in the next moment shade an engraved acanthus leaf as well as most 17th century Paris engravers is someone who bears watching. That, friends, is awesome versatility. I've long held that the healthiest thing for the custom gun trade is specialization, for that's certainly true historically, but in harping on that line I've ignored fellows like Jud Brennan who are little islands of artistry all unto themselves. If we feel a bit smug in having completed a presentable muzzleloader "all by ourselves," consider the number of specialists we've had working for us, just like having a shopfull of journeymen at beck-and-call. Without fine and precise investment castings, machined barrels, and such, most of us would be at sea. And most of us would have long since drowned if we'd spent the 150 hours or so required to make a skelp-welded rifle barrel, and then tried to find someone to pay for it.

Jud has a small and cluttered shop in his converted garage. I know not why some of the best genius resides in shops where the workbench resembles some ancient near-Eastern archaeological site, where layers upon layers of material culture lie superimposed. That sort of environment shows an intellect at work that's not easily distracted by anything. As for me, the top of my bench generally looks like it was arranged by a scrub nurse in an operating theater, because if I spend more than fifteen seconds looking for some tool or part, I'm more than likely to fling it through the wall when I finally find it.

Jud's shop houses his forge, power hammer, a lathe, drill press, grinders, and the usual complement of hand tools, including "about a million files," as he puts it. He says that he "wouldn't mind using all old-type tools, but like everyone else I have to speed it up to keep the price down. I am trying to learn how to use the old methods at the same time, though." Jud characterizes his work as a "combination of old and new methods," and, like others, has found that early technology often lends more



A triggerguard design by Simonin, also adapted by Brennan.

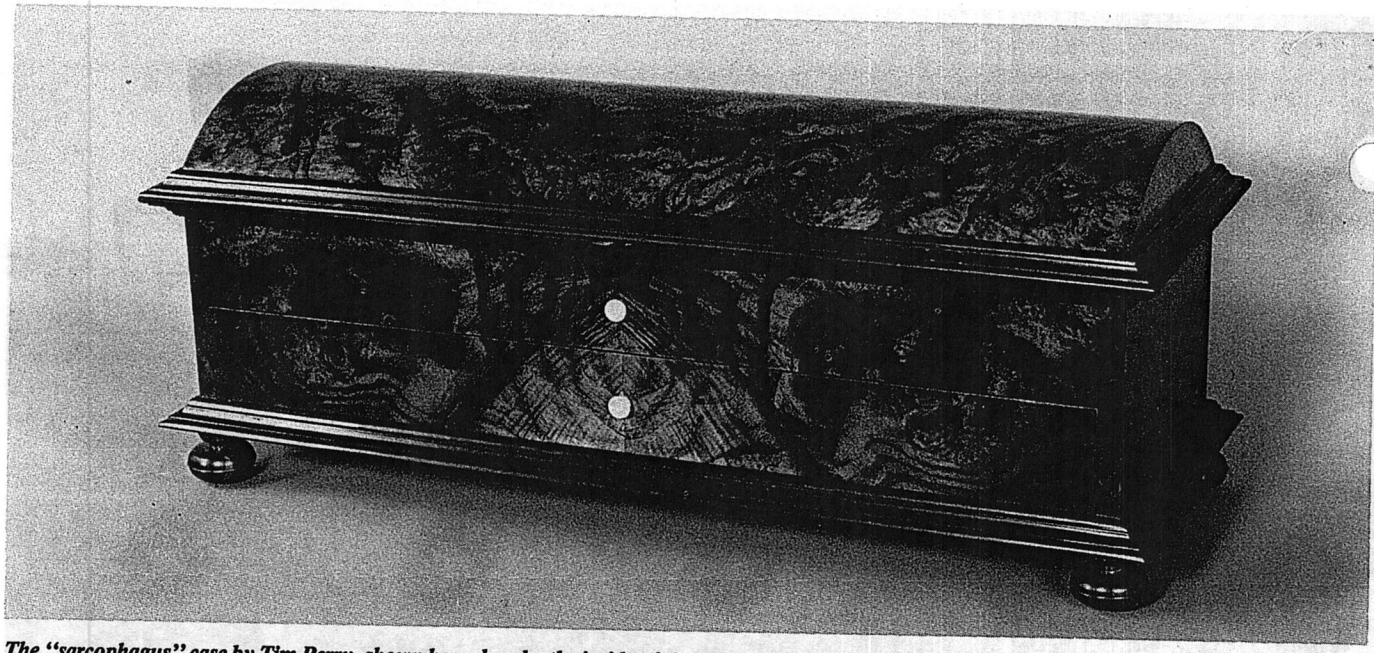
speed to gun work than modern machines can. Jud notes that many lock parts, for example, can be produced faster by forge and file than they can by a mill.

Jud has both a rifling bench and a boring bench, which he found necessary for finishing his own barrels. Few "modern" barrelmakers care to run $100 reamers down a hole filled with black scale that's harder than a witch's heart; the screeching sound such a tool makes as it galls its way along would bring tears to the eyes of the most vociferous jackass. Though Jud frequently makes his own locks, he also uses commercial units as well, especially Bud Siler's. He prefers Getz barrels, but likes to make most of his own hardware, particularly on iron-mounted guns. He is particularly fond of full cased sets filled with all manner of accessories, and that brings us to the object of this article.

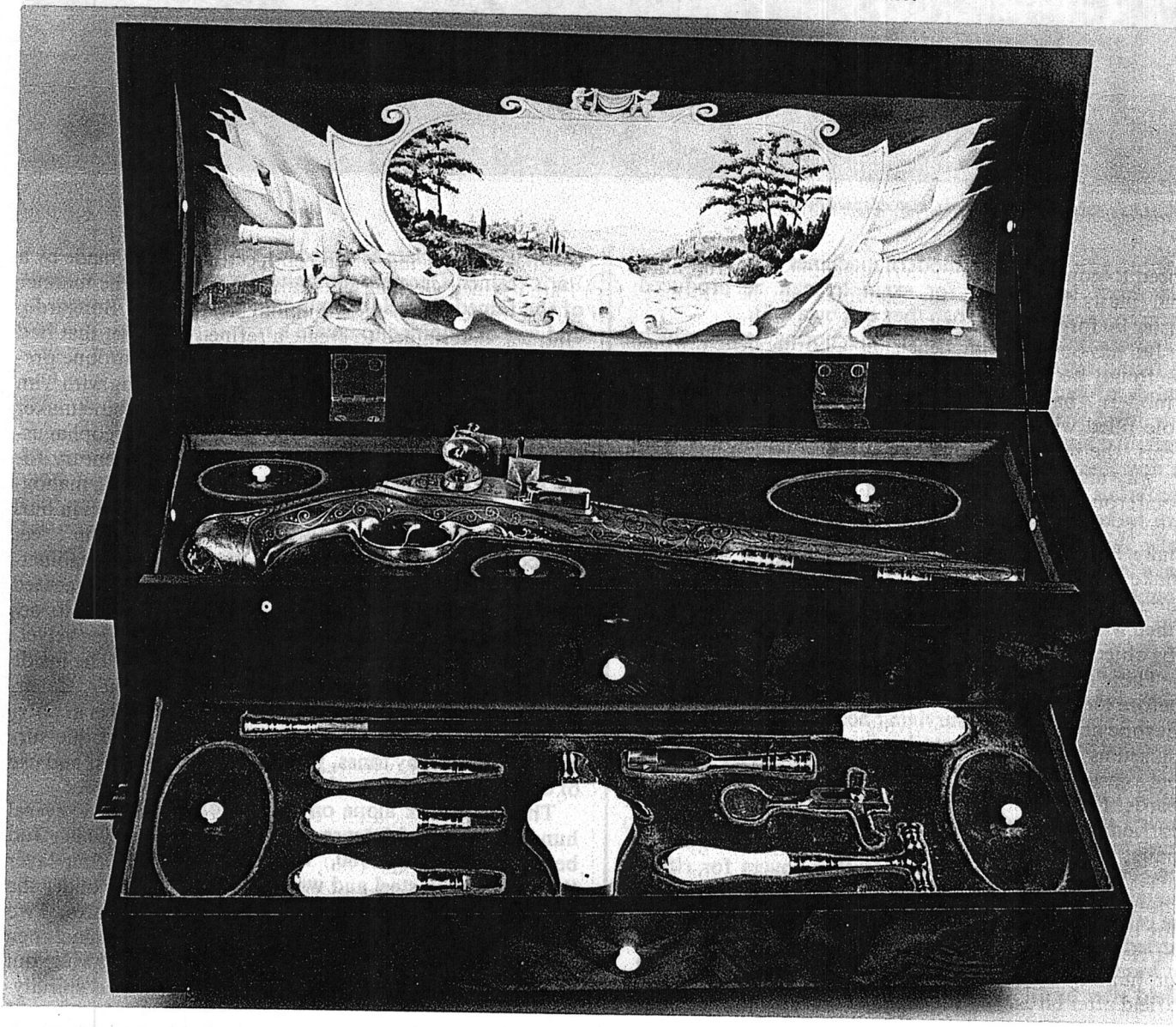
There's really almost no evidence of cased guns much before the 1770's, even in the great gunmaking centers of Europe and Britain. If surviving accessories in European museums and early inventories are any guide, about the only cases in use were leather or fabric holsters or scabbards. Large pistols such as the one illustrated here were carried in big hard-leather covered holsters, usually in pairs, made to be slung over the saddle in front of the rider. There is evidence of soft leather covers for rifles, though I've never seen one made for a fowler, so all of the other accessories that accompanied any firearm were carried in pockets or perhaps the commodious *jagdtasche* or hunting bag carried by German hunters who went afield after birds.

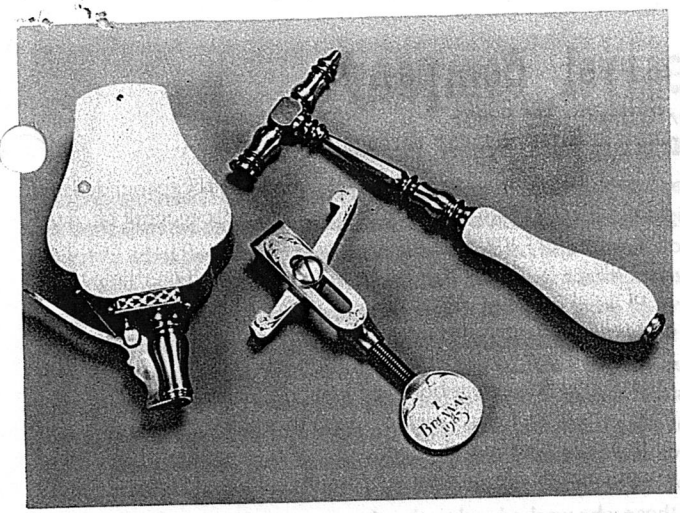
Envisioning a late seventeenth century pistol made by a Paris-trained German gunmaker, perhaps in the manner of the famed Dusseldorf gunmaker Hermann Bongarde, Jud was determined to create a refined cased set that had every appearance of having followed some Baroque precedent, even though none was known. Working with Tim Perry of Portland, Michigan, a full-time cabinetmaker and furniture conservator, Jud designed a sarcophagus-type case of the sort used in the seventeenth century for the storage of valuable crystal and the like. Using mahogany as a secondary wood, Perry veneered the case in burl walnut, fashioning the moldings and turned "bun" feet of ebony, a wood, incidentally, used by Paris cabinetmakers at least as early as the 1660's. Perry also executed "99%." of the "French" fitting of the pistol and its accessories, using pine blocks under a short-pile blue velvet. All of the tiny knobs were turned from ivory. The inside of the coffer lid was decorated by Jud's brother, Caleb, who is an artist and sculptor. The central scene is in polychrome oils, framed by a monochromatic Baroque surround done in gray tones, just the sort of contrast and use of colors appropriate to the period.

The metalwork alone on this pistol consumed several hundred hours of intense work. The barrel, which Jud began making in 1980, was forged from four-layer "piles" of mild steel and wrought iron welded under the hammer and then drawn out to half-inch squares. Two such piles were given a full-length hot twist and then welded together side-by-side, followed by drawing out into a flat ribbon of skelp used to form the spirally-→



The "sarcophagus" case by Tim Perry, shown here closed...the inside of the lid was painted by Jud's brother Caleb.





welded barrel. Though Jud had forged damascus blades for some time before attempting a barrel, accomplishing the difficult task of making such an intricate tube didn't seem challenge enough. He used his first damascus barrel as a ground for his first attempt at flush gold inlay, as the cover photograph shows. After the inlay and engraving was completed, Jud etched up the damascus pattern in slight relief, using a sulphuric acid solution. The acid "bites" steel at a faster rate than iron, thereby revealing the simple but dramatic pattern of the twisted elements. This was a common finishing technique among European gunmakers, who had learned the manufacture of pattern-welded gun barrels from the Turks; the later English "stub" twist, with its cloudy figuration, required a "flush" finish brought up by slow oxidation. Etched barrels were often left bright or even fire-blued, though some were given a light translucent brown.

Jud forged all of the furniture for the pistol himself, of course, finding the bulging pommel cap for the butt the most aggravating part of the metal work. After several attempts at making a spurred pommel had found themselves in the scrap pile, Jud finally milled a special cavity in his swage block for the purpose. It goes without saying that after all the filework needed to make such a cap, the inletting work which follows is even grimmer. The long, tapering, and curved spurs must be dovetailed into the stock, the entire job largely requiring that the pistol stock be shaped down during the process of inletting the pommel. In addition to the dovetails at the sides, a woodscrew is "secreted" under the mask, which is inevitably a separate piece made with a lug that pierces the pommel and in turn is held in place with a woodscrew under the triggerguard strap. Jud executed the high-relief chiseling needed for the grotesque mask in a piece of Getz barrel steel, which cut very smoothly.

The lock components were forged from mild steel with the exception of the springs, which Jud made from the digging bars of a mechanical potato digger; those happened to be made of 1095 steel. All of the mild steel parts were casehardened. The balustrate thimbles, like the originals, were turned, and then the "inside" half filed down to a plain tube for easier inletting. Rather than having to inlet all of the nasty convolutions of such an architectural shape, this method allows the balusters to come to rest against the wood on each side of the ramrod groove.

The stock was fashioned from New Zealand-grown *Juglans regia,* or European walnut. In designing the relief-carved decoration and silver wire inlay, Jud borrowed freely from seventeenth century Paris gunmakers' patterns, just as he did in the design of furniture such as the thimbles and triggerguard, all taken from Paul Simonin's 1684 *Plusieurs Pieces et Ornaments d'Arquebuzerie.* The elaborate steel sideplate, replete with a writhing beastie playfully nibbling certain portions of its own bod, is a literal copy of a Simonin plate. Such designs, of course, were published exactly for such use by gunmakers, and it's a notable thing that such ancient art may still be found to have vibrancy and even grotesque humor. Jud's actual source in his work was the late-lamented *Master French Gunsmith Designs,* a compilation of various collections of Baroque gunmaking whimsy by Stephen Grancsay, former arms curator of the Metropolitan Museum.

Not the least exhausted by all of the forging, filing, chiseling, and carving required to complete the pistol, Jud proceeded to forge, file and polish turnscrews, the parts for a valved pocket flask of early design, a spring cramp, flint knapper or "gun hammer" as they were called at the time, a patch cutter, and made a wiping stick to finish things off. Metal parts of the accessories are bright-finished steel, fitted with ivory, and many of them engraved to boot.

And, after all of this sophisticated and complex effort, does the thing shoot? But yes. Jud found it easy to keep all of the .50 cal. balls from the smoothbored barrel in a paper dinner plate at 25 yards, and noted that the piece had a natural pointability that would prove handy in "instinct" shooting. No doubt that would have been useful to a horseman who found himself waylaid by rogues on the High Road.

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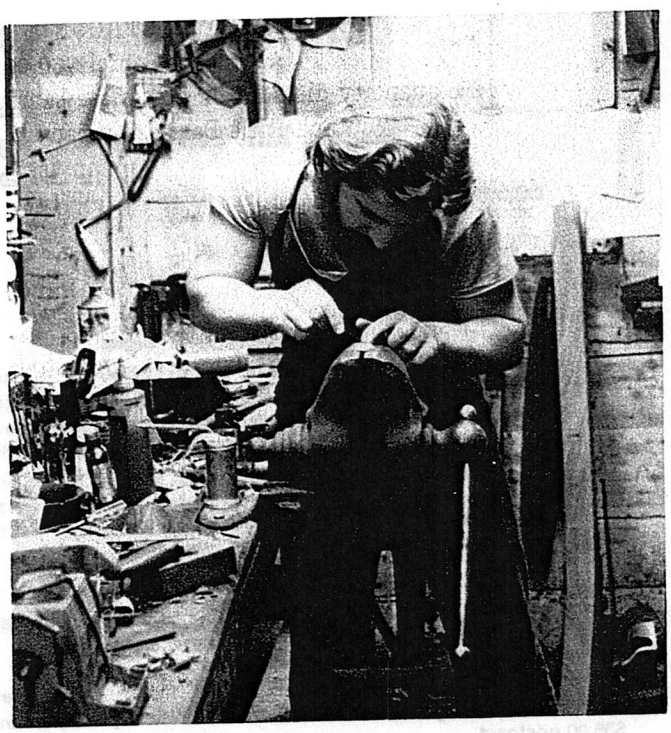

Jud Brennan at his cluttered bench in Lansing, Michigan.

Special Pistol

(continued from page 9)

And did the thing sell? But yes. Even though it carried a price tag of $15,000, which indeed is no staggering wage for a job which consumed over 1,000 hours, Jud owned the finished set for only a few months. That's a mightly fine comment on the sort of appreciation we might hope to see for such painstaking projects in the future.

Those of us content to loll about the woods with our battered squirrel rifles or squat down behind the sights of a heavy and no-nonsense bench gun whose artistry consists of tiny, single holes at long ranges might well mutter, "So what?" Yes, indeed. Well, we sure as heck wouldn't drag a Bongarde or a Piraube or a Boutet down to the pistol or trap range to bang at paper or pigeons, and we might not be able to afford such jewels in the first place, but if we didn't have them to see we'd be immeasurably deprived of some of the most exquisite art in the history of western culture. And my hat's off to anyone like brother Brennan who dares to equal all the skills of such High Priests of wood and metal. That's a longer and twistier road than most artisans can ever imagine, and requires more than a small measure of courage and motivation. ●