Blast from the Past

Historic gun receives technological tune-up.

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Today's modern in-line muzzleloaders have benefitted from nearly 700 years of firearm evolution. During the Middle Ages, when soldiers of the 1300s first lit the powder of a dangerous and crude hand-held cannon, little did they know that they were igniting a movement that would carry on to today's in-line muzzleloader and nearly all modern firearms.

One of the areas where muzzleloading firearms have seen some dramatic improvement is the ignition system. It seems like every few months there is a new method of igniting blackpowder guns. But this wasn't the case when muzzleloaders were first developing. Sometimes decades or centuries would pass before someone would invent a more reliable way to shoot a muzzleloader.

The dawn of the muzzleloader age was a harrowing time for its users, usually soldiers at the front line of a war. They would ignite the gun using a lit wick inserted in a touch hole, while at the same time, aiming the barrel in the general direction of the approaching enemy. If the barrel did not explode or kick back and injure the user, the gun would lob a hot ball of lead and, with luck, hit an enemy soldier.

During the 1400s and 1500s, the serpentine lock and matchlock ignition systems allowed the user to have both hands on the gun, improving accuracy and safety for the shooter. The glowing wick ignited a powder charge with the aid of a trigger mechanism. But wicks weren't reliable in wet weather and needed constant attention to keep the gun ready for action. Shooters would hold several slow-burning fuses between their fingers as they shot and reloaded.

With the development of the wheellock, snaphaunce and flintlock during the late 1500s and early 1600s, the burning wick or slow match was replaced with a flint and steel mechanism that showered sparks into a pan filled with gunpowder. The gun became more reliable and easier to shoot, but wasn't impervious to wet or windy weather conditions.

It wasn't until the early 1800s that the caplock replaced the flint and steel. The trigger mechanism used a hammer to strike a cap containing fulminate of mercury, a chemical compound that explodes when struck. Shooters no longer needed to worry about a gust of wind blowing the blackpowder out of the pan or moisture affecting the charge, flint or frizzen. The cap

eventually developed into the primer that rests in shell casings of today's bullets.

It took nearly another 200 years before Tony Knight developed the modem in-line muzzleloader in 1985. The plunger-type ignition system shielded the cap from the elements and made the muzzleloader even more reliable. The in-line muzzleloader sparked renewed interest in a weapon that had been relegated to period re-enactments, traditional shooting and hunting clubs and museum pieces. The renewed interest sparked even more developments. The muzzleloaders were redesigned to shoot further and more accurately, utilizing

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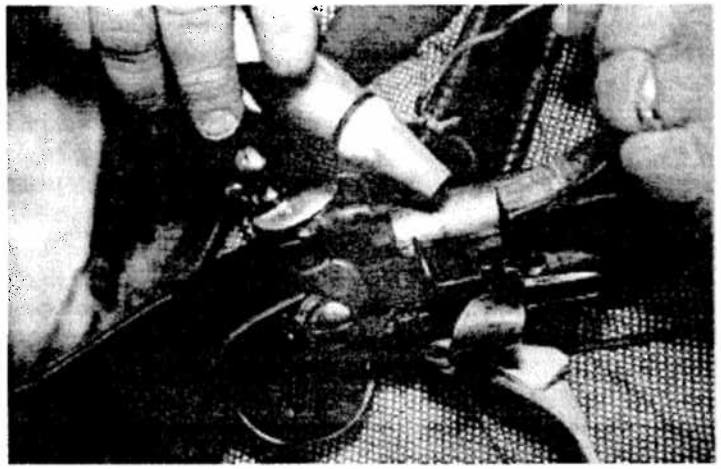


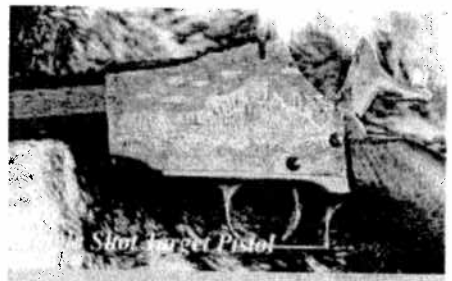
The renewed interest in muzzleloaders has lured many new shooters to traditional firearms such as the flintlock.

improvements that went into other firearms, such as rifles and shotguns. They also were outfitted and accessorized with all the newest gadgets that are attractive to new muzzleloader enthusiasts, such as fiber optic sights, laser dot scopes, copper-

Mike Reynolds of Pawnee demonstrated his flintlock muzzleloader at the Annual Blackpowder Clinic held in Springfield.

plated bullets with sabots and interchangeable ignition systems and barrels.

With so many choices, there was bound to be some confusion as to what type of gun to use when hunting in Illinois. To help clear the air, Jack Ward, Illinois field representative of the International Blackpowder Hunting Association, started holding annual clinics, giving seminars and publishing newsletters to educate enthusiasts about



Want to have a blast?

The South Fork Sportsmen's C[illegible] Annual Blackpowder Clinic Sept. 21-22 on Route 29 one m[illegible] formational sessions, seminars, an open shooting range and ma[illegible] Contact Jack Ward, Illinois IBHA representative by phone at (217) 623-5224 or via [illegible]

Many of the newer muzzleloaders [illegible] e fiber optic sights that are [illegible] nt for overcast or low-light [illegible] ions.

The muzzleloader continues to evolve as gun designers come up with improvements that make the guns more reliable, safer and more accurate.

Shooters have plenty of choices for blackpowder and blackpowder substitutes. It is important to use the right powder for your gun. Consult an expert when necessary.

all the latest developments in muzzleloaders. Ward is also very active in introducing youth and women to muzzleloaders through his youth workshops with the Illinois Federation of Outdoor Resources and his involvement with the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program, sponsored by the DNR.

"There seems to be a lot of misinformation on the new ignition systems, especially among those wanting to use their guns for deer hunting," Ward stated. "Using a rifle primer does not make a muzzleloader a rifle, or using a shotgun primer does not make it shotgun. As long as it is loaded from the muzzle end, it's still a muzzleloader."

Ward recommended that those interested in purchasing their first muzzleloader steer away from those priced below $150. The less-expensive guns are not very reliable and may discourage new shooters. Most people will find a good quality gun in the $300 to $500 range and by adding about $50 in accessories, they will be ready to shoot.

Ward commented further on gunpowder.

"Only blackpowder and blackpowder substitutes such as Pyrodex and Triple Seven are legal to use in Illinois. Smokeless powders (nitrocellulose based) are illegal and dangerous. The smokeless powder can cause some guns not designed to handle smokeless powders to explode."

Shown from l-r: Musket caps, flint, round ball, saboted bullet, conical bullet and 209 primer.

Muzzleloader applications for deer hunting have jumped significantly in the past decade from only 200-300 applications in 1991 to more than 5,000

applications in the past year. More hunters also are electing to use their muzzleloaders during the regular firearm season, because the muzzleloaders are more accurate at longer distances.

In order to learn more about this growing sport. Ward encouraged new shooters to join a local club or attend one of the many rendezvous and reenactments held throughout the year in Illinois and neighboring states.

Blackpowder information on the web

The International Blackpowder Hunting Association: www.98.net/ibha.
Connecticut Valley Arms: www.cva.com.
Knight Rifles: www.knightrifles.com.
Traditions Firearms: www.traditionsfirearms.com.
Thompson Center Arms: www.tcarms.com.
Davide Pedersoli Muzzleloaders: www.davide-pedersoli.com.
Hodgdon blackpowder substitutes: www.hodgdon.com.

Deer hunting with muzzleloading firearms in Illinois

A muzzleloading firearm is defined as a blackpowder firearm that is incapal loaded from the breech end. Legal muzzleloading rifles can be single or dou They must be at least .45 caliber and shoot a single projectile through a barr 16 inches in length. Percussion cap, wheellock, matchlock or flint type ignit used.

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