

CABINET MAKER TURNED

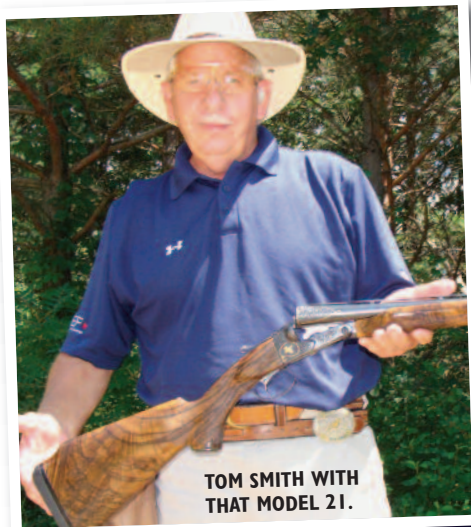
STOCK MAKER

DANA FARRELL TALKS
WITH **TOM SMITH**

Stock maker Tom Smith is sitting in his Weston (Ohio) workshop, showing me a pretty little 28 gauge Winchester Model 21 that belongs to a Virginia man. The gun has the original factory wood, with better than average grain – but the owner wants a custom stock and Smith has reluctantly agreed to make him one.

He's hesitant because the customer is insisting on an unusually large palm swell. "This guy wants a palm swell five times bigger than it should be! I can't talk him out of it. I'm gonna get more bad press from the people in Virginia – because it's such a gorgeous little shotgun and it's gonna have this big, hideous palm swell."

His fears were lessened when they eventually compromised on a "diamond grip" – a ridge down both sides of the grip. I understand Smith's concern for his reputation, but having seen more than a few examples of his work, I'm sure the customer will be thrilled with the end result (unusual palm swell or not). Smith's work is just that good.



TOM SMITH WITH THAT MODEL 21.

A legend of sorts in this part of the country, Smith has been around the business a long time and like any good craftsman, integrity and professional reputation is intimately important to him. A cabinet maker turned gunstock maker, he has carved over 700 stocks, with many of his customers owning multiple examples of his work. He doesn't advertise – not because he's a poor businessman, but because he doesn't need to. He simply relies on repeat customers for his business and has no trouble staying busy. You just don't build that sort of customer base by doing shabby work.

Now in his early sixties, Smith was a NSSA skeet shooter for years and recorded numerous 100 straights before turning his attention to sporting clays in the early 1990s. "I've shot everything there was to shoot and I was fairly competitive at all of it – now it's just time to shoot and have fun."

His resume is impressive. A founding member of the Ohio Sporting Clays Association, as an NSCA national delegate he served in that organization for several years. He was the Zone III Sporting Clays Champion in 1991 and again in 1992 and won the

Ohio State Sporting Clays Championship in 1997. He joined the ranks of Mark Kiddie and other influential Ohioans when he had the honor of being elected to the Ohio Sporting Clays Hall of Fame in 2008.

A former Master class shooter, Smith has settled into AA class and usually



shoots a stunningly beautiful Model 21 side by side (circa 1947) that he of course stocked himself – with tasteful engraving and gold inlays by Bill Mains. Pointing to the Model 21 he says, "This right here is the only advertising I do. I'll get on a squad with some new guys and they'll look at my gun and ask who made my stock and I'll say, well – I did. They'll say, *Oh, you're that Tom Smith*". His Model 21 wears an exquisite piece of feathered crotch English walnut that he had in his shop but just couldn't bear to part with. The wood came from Cecil Fredi out in Las Vegas who said that it was a one in about six thousand blanks – and he ought to know. (Fredi keeps around thirty thousand blanks on hand at any given time).

The Smith Way

Smith brings the customer into the stock making process to a high degree and the process seems to

work well for both parties. It takes place in two phases. The initial roughing out and on site "shooting in" of the gun, and then the checkering and final finishing which is done after the customer has taken the gun home and put at least one thousand rounds through it. Smith has several automatic traps in his yard, which he uses when making the initial 'shooting in' adjustments. "Normally, I have the guy come in and we cut and grind the stock to fit, then we take

spot on, I'll put the checkering and the finish on it and that's the last time I usually touch the gun."

Smith no longer actually does his own checkering because he's too busy making stocks. He has a local craftsman who now does it for him – a ceramic tile setter he met when he hired him for a bathroom renovation. "He came out and was watching me checker and said *'Boy, I'd really like to learn how to do that'*. I told him he was the only guy with patience enough that I'd want to teach." The man picked it up fast and does an outstanding job. Smith still does the design layout on the blanks with masking tape but leaves the actual checkering to Dennis 'the tile setter'.

Smith isn't one to keep a gun in his shop any longer than he has to. "I don't get a guy's gun in six months before I need it – I get it in three days before I need it. Typically, what I say is if I get your gun in on Monday and I've got your wood, you can come Friday and try it. If it's a Perazzi or Krieghoff I can have it ready to shoot in about two days. It takes me about a day to rough them out, get them on the gun and then I'll glass bed everything. The next day I'll grind everything down, get the wood to metal fit and get everything ready to shoot." This is in sharp contrast to many stock makers who will hold onto a gun for several months or more.

When the gun is fit to where it should be, Smith likes to allow three weeks to complete the job. "We don't always need three weeks, but I never lie to anybody," he says. "A lot of times it only takes two weeks, sometimes two and a half weeks, depending on how much checkering we've got to do and how busy we are. I'd rather tell him three weeks and have it back in two and a half than tell him three and have it back in four."

Palm swell and fit

In Smith's opinion a palm swell should be enough to fill your hand – but not over fill it. "The purpose of a palm swell is to help position your finger on the trigger," he explains. "If it fits your hand, it will give you the same trigger pull no matter whether the gun's pointed over your head or down below your feet. A lot of times on a slender grip (without a palm swell) you can slip up the grip and have more trigger pull or slip back on it which gives you less trigger pull."

When shaping a palm swell he likes to get even color (pressure) in each fingernail – that's a good indicator that it's right. "I want to see a guy's hands comfortable on the gun with his arms positioned naturally – it ensures that you don't get any fatigue. I know this guy who has a band around his elbow because he's getting tendonitis and that's because his palm swell's too big. What he's doing is taking the recoil in the wrist rather than taking it back in the shoulder where it should be."

Smith's goal is to provide a gun fit that allows complete comfort. He likes to see between one and two inches between the nose and thumb and for the shooter to look perfectly relaxed and natural – and believes that way a lot of shells can be shot without fatigue. "You don't get the pounding, the sore neck, sore back or sore shoulders. I put the heel directly aligned with the bores to guide the recoil straight back into the shoulder evenly. Then I cast the comb off whichever way I have to go to get the customer's eye lined up with the barrel. The top of the comb is parallel with the rib, the side of the comb is parallel with the rib – so no matter where his face is on the comb, he's got the same sight picture. When he feels the

pressure on his cheek, he pulls the trigger. That's the whole theory and the nice thing about it is that you never get kicked – you really don't get that felt recoil."

Stock bending

Smith doesn't bend stocks and he's not shy about expressing his thoughts on the practice. "I don't believe in bending – I won't bend a stock. I was a cabinet maker before I got into this business." Pointing to the Model 21 he continues, "This piece of wood is doing exactly what it wants to do right now. If you try to force it to do something else there are a lot of things that can go wrong. It can crack or it can split." He believes he's probably losing \$40,000 a year by not bending stocks. "I'll take a guy's stock and I'll sand the side of it off, I'll push his face over and then I can refinish it to make it



look just like it did when we started out. That way I know it's going to be there in a year, two years, three years – it's going to be exactly where we left it that day.

"I won't bend anything and I don't like anything mechanical. I'll put on the occasional adjustable butt if a guy needs more drop at the heel – mainly just to get it down. I'm not a big believer in a lot of toe-out on guns. We're all built differently but everybody has a shoulder pocket, and if you can hit that pocket, that's the best deal. My big thing is the pitch – to get the angle right at the pad so that when you have the gun up you have 100% coverage on your shoulder. If the toe's catching you, you're gonna get a bad mount because you're gonna mount it wherever that toe hits. And then what happens is you get more muzzle jump and start getting kissed in the cheek. A lot of times

guys come in here with their guns set up like that and they don't know if they hit their first target in a double or not. They'll turn to their squad and say "did I hit that"? I tell them if you didn't see it, we have to change something. When we're going through that process I'll keep shaping shims and give them some recoil back on their shoulder, then we'll go out and shoot different targets. When I'm building a stock we do all this with just the wood against your shoulder – there's no pad on it. So, if we get this piece of wood on your shoulder with no discomfort, I know I've got the fit right. Then I cut it down, put a pad on it and we're good to go."

Adjustable combs

Adjustable combs are handy in Smith's opinion, because they can make a gun fit about 99% of the shooters out there – but he doesn't install them. Believing they are good if adjusted properly and left in place, he says way too many shooters adjust them between stations when they're having a bad day. "When they start fiddling with it, it's just gonna make things worse. Most guys can't leave them alone. Get it set where it goes, Loctite it and live with it."

Wood

Ninety percent of the wood Smith uses is English walnut out of the California walnut groves. Most are grafted – English walnut to Black walnut because the Black walnut rootstock does better in the local soil conditions. You get a lot of swirling grain at the graft line which you can generally see in the blank that makes for nice figuring. Bastogne is another nice walnut tree that comes out of California, many of which were planted by a

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Johnny Appleseed like character around the State. Maple is very inexpensive, but it's a little more brittle than walnut so it's prone to splitting. Smith likes Maple on autoloaders especially, but cautions it can crack – and a lot of guns get accidently dropped in sporting clays.

Costs

He charges \$200 for a gun fitting. “That gets you in the door, we shoot some targets and we figure out what we’re gonna do to your gun. I’ll explain to you what I think needs to be done – if you want to do it, fine – if you don’t, fine. I’ve had guys who wanted their guns fit but they didn’t want me to touch their finish. I’ve had guys who wanted their guns fit, but they have to fit back in their gun case – that tells me what their priorities are as far as getting their guns set up.”

He gets \$2400 labor to make a stock (for most guns) if he furnishes the wood and a standard checkering pattern is used. He’ll charge \$200 more if the wood is purchased elsewhere, but won’t guarantee it. Blanks are extra and go from \$300 to \$2600. The blank is paid for in full when chosen, 50% of the stock making fee is paid when the gun is fit and the balance when it’s completed. He glass beds everything and often inlays and glasses music wire around critically weak areas such as tangs and trigger guards.

Tom Smith is a one-of-a-kind artisan that breathes a creative breath of fresh air into our everyday production line world. If you get a chance to handle one of his guns, you’ll walk away convinced that you’ve just held an original work of art worthy of anybody’s collection. His business card says “Life is too short to spend it with an ugly gun”. This shooter for one would have to agree. ■
