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Africa shooter also a Kalispell gun legend

<p>John Buhmiller is pictured on a safari in Tanganyika, Africa.</p>

By **Tom Lotshaw**
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Gun builders and barrel makers have called the Flathead Valley home for decades. John Buhmiller was one of the first.

He set the bar high. Buhmiller was a colorful character who built reputable rifle barrels and with his large-caliber rifles became the de facto varmint hunter of Tanganyika, Africa, in the 1950s.

That meant hunting big game in the thick bush of East Africa.

Buhmiller's kill list is unprecedented by today's standards: 183 elephants, 18 rhinoceros, 71 buffalo, one hippo, one giraffe, five eland, 32 gnu, 41 zebra, six waterbucks, 33 impala, 35 baboons, 23 warthogs, 4 wild dogs and 9 hyenas.

"Uncle John," as he was known on both continents, worked for years as a Great Northern Railway telegraph operator in Eureka. He moved to Kalispell in the 1940s and opened his machine shop on Woodland Avenue.

The shop could be a scary place for friends and for employees such as Lester Bauska, another longtime Kalispell barrel maker who got his start working there.

That's because Buhmiller liked to go catch bagfuls of snakes, bring them back to his shop and turn them loose. It didn't help that he was prone to pulling pranks, too.

"[Buhmiller] was a snake guy," said 82-year-old rifle builder Jerry Fisher, no stranger to Buhmiller's old shop. "He liked rattlesnakes and anything else that wiggled on the ground."

James Handcock, owner of Blacktail Mountain Books, remembers the story of how his friend Bauska, who died last November at age 92, went to work one morning and saw Buhmiller on the floor looking under machines. Bauska left about as quickly as he could. And he refused to return until whatever missing snake was found.

Local lore has it that Buhmiller let his rattlesnakes out at night, figuring they'd be scarier than any guard dog and quieter for the neighbors.

Strange? Probably. A bit of a workplace safety risk and possibly inefficient to round up each morning by today's manufacturing standards? Probably.

But over several decades Buhmiller machined thousands of custom rifle barrels in his Kalispell shop, selling them to gun builders from all over and becoming one of the country's busiest and best-known barrel markers.

The barrels were "considered to be among the sport's finest" by hunters and sharpshooters of the time, according to a brief Sports Illustrated article on Buhmiller in 1962.

The story goes that when Buhmiller took his first trip to Africa he used his two-elephant permit to help out a farmer who was having problems with elephants destroying fences and trampling crops.

Tanganyika's overwhelmed and under-equipped game department took notice and enlisted Buhmiller and his homemade rifle to help thin a herd of 12,000 elephants and do other control hunting.

Buhmiller made nine trips to Africa.

He stayed for months at a time to hunt and test his powerful rifles and cartridges. He brought back numerous photos, hundreds of feet of 16-millimeter film and even more stories.

BUHMILLER WAS one of the first in a long line of barrel makers and gun makers to follow in the Flathead Valley.

Bauska went on to have a long career in the barrel-making business, running his famously untidy shop on Second Street West in Kalispell.

Jim Baiar remembers Bauska as an "irascible old man who made a lot of barrels."

Baiar has machined high-precision barrels at his small Halfmoon Rifle Shop in Columbia Falls for several decades and is teaching the trade to his 20-year-old grandson, Michael.

J. Hall Sharon built barrels as the Sharon Rifle Barrel Co. Mel Smart built and sold his popular Acra-Bond laminate rifle stocks.

Brian Sipe started making rifle barrels with guidance from Bauska and went on to found Montana Rifle Co., which has grown tremendously. Now known as Montana Rifleman, it machines more than 300,000 barrels a year and builds various gun components and a sister company, Montana Firearms Group, has its own line of popular production hunting rifles.

SOME OF THE nation's top gun makers have called the Flathead Valley home. For decades they have quietly set the standard for custom rifles built with Old World-style craftsmanship.

Monty Kennedy came to the Flathead from California in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Kennedy packed mules in the Bob Marshall Wilderness for the U.S. Forest Service in the summer and built nationally renowned stocks and rifles at his shop in Lakeside. In 1962 he published "The Checkering and Carving of Gunstocks" that still is in print today.

Jerry Fisher got his start building rifles with Kennedy. Fisher was recruited by Kennedy in the mid-1950s while a student at the Colorado School of Trades. Fisher has been making custom rifles for 58 years. Others in the field recognize him as "one of the best."

Tom Burgess came to the Flathead Valley from Spokane, and up until his death was one of the finest metal workers in the country, working out of his shop on McMannamy Draw.

Lee Helgeland and Monte Mandarino also build nationally renowned custom rifles.

"It has always perplexed me how this valley is like a magnet for gun builders," said Gene Gordner. Gordner's a custom gun builder who moved to the valley in 1978 and builds guns for Kilimanjaro Rifles, formerly Serengeti Rifles.

He suggests those gun makers who weren't born in Northwest Montana came here for the same main reason he did: It's just a darn nice place to live and build guns.

Reporter Tom Lotshaw may be reached at 758-4483 or by email at lotshaw@dailyinterlake.com.

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