

The Legend

of

The Barn Wood

By Richard Borecky



The Barn Wood, hmmmmm, where to start? It has been a legend that has mystified many for years, except those who were actually involved. To say the Barn continues to work in the collecting world long after it has been emptied is an understatement. People have talked about this building as if it were a mystical place like El Dorado, keeping it alive like children telling ghost stories at a campfire.

I came into the picture later and only due to my working on the leftovers that Jim Yocum of Dupage Trading had saved on his trips to the Barn. It was sometime around 1999 or 2000 that I started working for Jim, repairing broken Garand, 1903, Carbine and other military gunstocks. Jim had sat on much of the wood since the 1980's after a failed attempt at having it repaired. The other party was sanding markings off and using a very poor repair material. He parted ways with a partner on this wood and put it up until he met with me at the Ohio Gun Collectors show. I had bought from Jim in the past, but never met him.



A stack of Garand stocks, but a tiny fraction of what came out of the barn.

We decided to form a relationship on this wood, which is where the story began for me. It put me in touch with some of the people with whom I have formed relationships and who are good friends to this day. What I have found while handling this wood is that there are a few things people have misunderstood, like stains that today are called "blood stains," but

which turned out to be animal defecation. We found that plenty of the Barn Wood was covered in chicken manure and other creatures' waste. This made black stains that cannot be removed from the stocks unless they are heavily sanded, and then it still shows, depending on how deep it has sunk into the wood.

From this venture with Jim, I started to notice a lot of oddities and decided to keep notes and photos. I was able to put my very pricey digital camera to good use. I mentioned to Jim what I had figured out on early Winchester wood versus Springfield and how the differences were found on no-trap stocks.



Culling out the no-traps.

How many collectors have ever seen this many in one place?

This was wood made in the beginning of production that did not have an access hole in the butt plate to store the cleaning kit. That was a later thought when Springfield decided to make use of the lightening holes drilled in the rear of the stock. Initially, these two holes were only intended to reduce weight. I was noting every angle I could see and found something new with every new batch of wood Jim sent to me. What I didn't know was that Jim had contacted Robert Seccombe, a longtime acquaintance of his, to let him know I had started to make sense of the wood markings. I honestly didn't think anything of it, except for my own enjoyment. My father was pretty stern on paying attention to details. When I was a kid, I thought he was being too tough on me, but as I look back now, I have to thank him for it.

Unknown to me, Robert Seccombe had already kept notes of wood he had bought in the early 80's, after Billy Pyle told him about Pete Michaels who was buying military stocks from a man who had apparently started buying the wood in the late 1940's from Rock Island Arsenal. But wait, I am getting too far ahead and behind, so I will start from the beginning.



The Discovery

In the early 1980's, a surplus dealer named Pete Michaels somehow learned of a rural Wisconsin barn full of old military rifle stocks ... over 10,000 of them. The trove included an extraordinary number of very early M1 stocks. The barn was owned by a Mr. Berkoff, and Pete established a relationship with him and later his wife, Edith, after he passed away.

Berkoff was a chemist who apparently used chemicals in pesticides. He bought surplus chemical lots from several military depots, including Rock Island. For unknown reasons, he started buying huge lots of surplus wood. They may have been lumped into chemical lots, or they might have been for burning to heat the house or barn.

By the time Pete Michaels arrived, the M1903 wood had been pretty well picked over by Bill Rodgers of Springfield Sporters and John Arnold of National Ordnance, who had found the stash before him. That is probably how Pete learned of it, but nobody knows. There were a lot of absolutely destroyed 1903 stocks left, but with the '03 almost 80 years old and a very popular collectible, they were the stocks in demand, and so Pete took all of this damaged wood. These broken stocks led me to believe the wood purchased by Mr. Berkoff was for firewood. Carbine stocks were stacked up in nice neat rows against one wall after Bob Ruvell, another predecessor, had picked through them.

Apparently, the dealers who got there before Pete did not have much interest in the M1 wood, since it wasn't in great demand at the time. The rest were in large stacks and in Gaylord boxes full of 1917 Enfield, Garand and more Carbine wood. A Gaylord was a large, thick cardboard box and held around 150 stocks. All of this wood had been rejected by the military for reasons from minor to major. Many of the M1 stocks were scrapped because of their unwanted solid butt plate, no-trap design. Many of the Garand stocks still had the solid butt plates on them.



An unmodified SPG gem with early large over small hole, a heart-stopper for restorers.

Pete bought wood from Mr. Berkoff early on and had them shipped to him. Apparently, and to Pete's dismay, Berkoff had at first sent some warped '03 stocks. These had either been ruined from lying outside of the barn or bought this way. Most of them were curved to the right or the left. He ordered more over the years and was happy with the succeeding purchases. It should be noted that most of this wood was not in great demand at the time, but Pete was one of the few people who had it for sale.

Finally, Pete called to put in another order, and Edith Berkoff informed him that Mr. Berkoff had passed away. She asked Pete to take all of the wood at \$1.00 a stock. He wasn't interested in that proposal, but started going to the barn on weekends with a box trailer and camping there while he sifted through wood that at the time was considered almost worthless. Pete said there was so much Carbine wood that he finally got tired of going through it and left it alone. When sorting the Garand wood, he only took those that had minor damage or, as he put it, "with one hit." This meant he might have to do one repair at worst.

It should be noted that there were plenty of surplus Garands coming in at this time from Korea, the Philippines, and other foreign countries. There was a lot of nice wood on these rifles. Having the correct markings was not a priority at that time, since very few people collected them. Then President Clinton put the import ban into effect, and no more parts or wood were allowed into the country. This in part started a rise in wood prices, but it took some time to happen. It is hard to imagine having piles of WWI and WWII stocks just lying around with very little interest, but that's the way it was. People had plenty of it in storage but no Internet for others to know where it was. The only option was to advertise in trade papers like Shotgun News. No books were available, so having marked wood wasn't a priority, since most people didn't know what these marks meant. When Scott Duff wrote his first book, things changed pretty much overnight. The Garand Collectors Association was also formed in 1986. People now had an avenue to understand their M1 Garands like never before. With the way prices are today, it is so easy to fantasize about a time machine and to have saved this wood for a later date.

Garand Collectors Learn of The Barn

At this point, Billy Pyle (later author of *The Gas Trap Garand*) entered the picture. He was talking to Pete at a show and told him he was looking for Garand stocks that did not have the butt end cut for the hinged butt plate. Pete told him he had found a barn full of stocks, and many were this unmodified type. Unfortunately, many of them were damaged, since they were lying all over the floor and rats were gnawing at them. He had no interest in this early wood. Pete brought some stocks to Billy and Pyle verified that it was what he was looking for.

Billy was working with Robert Seccombe at the time, looking for early M1 rifles and parts. He told Robert about Pete's adventures and what he was bringing back. Robert ordered four of the early Garand stocks that almost no one cared about then. It took a long time to deliver them, as Pete wanted enough orders to justify a trip to the barn, and both Billy and Robert finally gave up. Other M1 collectors heard the rumors and approached Pete at gun shows, but all he ever said was, "Yeah, I have to get back there sometime."

More than a year passed, but Pete eventually contacted Robert and delivered the stocks he had ordered. The first four were WRA/WB stocks that still had their solid butt plates, and Robert was amazed, because at the time these were rarely seen. He paid \$20 apiece for what today has sold in the \$4,000 and up range.



By now Pete began to realize that some of these M1 stocks were rare and raised the price on the nicest ones. There were not a lot of them in the piles he had recently gone through, so he thought this may be the last batch of early stocks to come out of the barn. However, he called Robert to see if he wanted to buy 100 stocks from his last trip, all or none and no cherry picking. If he took them all, it would be \$2,000, quite a mark-up from the \$100 they had cost Pete. That was a pretty large chunk of change, and Robert was short \$500. He called his friend Dan Murtz to see if Dan wanted to make the purchase with him. He told him they would get their money back by selling some stocks and have plenty left over for themselves. Dan agreed, and they set up the purchase. I don't think at that point Robert had a clue to the wealth of knowledge that would come from these stocks, but I know he understands it today.

The two of them drove down to St. Charles, Illinois, in Dan's Lincoln and, since neither had a pick-up truck, piled the barn wood into his nice car. Pete had put them in drawstring military laundry bags, ten to a bag. There were many beautifully grained Winchester stocks, drawing-numbered Springfield wood with large over small hole, and plenty of markings and, of course, solid butt plates. The Winchester stocks included a lot of what appeared to be custom-shop wood used on their premium rifles. Winchester was one of the largest hunting rifle manufactures of the day. They had access to stockpiled fancy wood if, as in this case, they appeared to be short of plain wood stocks. This might be due to not having ordered enough until they knew the M1 Educational Order would result in the award of a production contract. The grain was so fancy on some stocks that it had to have been set aside for use on high-grade hunting rifles. I have been lucky enough to see some of this wood and have even repaired some to keep it usable.



**These photos show
Burl walnut
that probably came from
the Winchester
custom shop.**

During this adventure, Robert started to make notes on the butt plates. Today his discovery is the accepted way to tell Winchester from the second type Springfield plate: the fully checkered edge is Winchester and the sporadic missing diamonds denote Springfield. Then he started noting what we call “ferrule codes” and barrel channel markings. The ferrule codes are on what is really called the front boss of the stock, the protrusion onto which you slip the front ferrule. Inspectors put a mark there when finished with their part of the work. He also noticed Winchester’s clearance beveling for their poor tolerances in the area where the follower arm is attached to the follower rod. It appears Winchester made this angle heavier in the early wood.

Robert used the knowledge he had gained to help Scott Duff on his *Red Book The M1 Garand: World War II* and provided some nice inspection-marked wood and solid butt plates. He had three early large-over-small-hole SA/SPG stocks with numbered butt plates. There were also numbered screws and rear swivels, but none had front ferrules. The stocks all had drawing numbers, too. The assumption was that the plates were obsolete, so RIA left them on when the stocks were scrapped. These also showed Robert that a no-serif P proof was used first. Sometime after the drawing number was deleted, they began to use the serified proof P until the end of production.

Pete also had plenty of loose butt plates he saved from damaged stocks. Many made it back into circulation or are still being held in collections hidden away by a few people to whom he sold large amounts. Pete had realized there was a growing number of collectors who wanted these butt plates, so they were not included anymore when Robert bought additional stocks. He was asked to pay \$20 a plate, which today would be an amazing price, as some are now going as high as \$1,000 on auction sites.



**GCA Charter Member
Robert Seccombe,
a key player in the Barn
Wood story.**

Robert is a Charter Member of the GCA, and did an article for the Spring 1988 *GCA Newsletter* on butt plates and another on the differences between Winchester and Springfield stocks. He also sent three nice stocks off to Billy Pyle for putting him in touch with Pete. Robert later bought broken wood that he passed on to some friends and also sent some off to me for repairs. I later bought a few of these for my own collection.

By this time, Pete had just about picked all he wanted from the barn and had stopped going on trips, unless he had some large orders like Robert’s or the big lot he had sold to Numrich Gun Parts. Pete began talking about the barn more openly, and word was spreading of this large barn full of wood in the back roads of Wisconsin. People at gun shows were buzzing about what they heard.

Enter Jim Yokum

Jim Yokum was a modest collector and part-time trader in gun parts. He had previously worked gun shows for a large dealer but was recently unemployed. At a Milwaukee show around 1989, a young man approached Jim’s table and asked if he wanted to buy some Garand wood. He told Jim he lived at a house south of the city, and it had a barn that was full of stocks. Jim didn’t follow up at the time, but later realized that he had a few people looking for Garand wood and it might be a way to make some much-needed money. He also remembered that Pete Michaels had been showing up at gun shows with 20 or 30 Garand stocks, and recalled the rumors of a barn find. He thought it might be the same place. Unfortunately, he had not taken the guy’s phone number.

Jim did remember the young man saying that he lived on 18 Mile Road and thinking, there's no 18 Mile Road, there is only a 20 Mile Road. He called phone company Information, trying to link the name to a road in that area, but that failed. Then he began calling the operators for all the area codes of lower Wisconsin. On the third call he found him.

When Jim pulled up, he saw an old white house with a large white barn in the back. In the center of the barn was a horse, hay was piled up on the right, and to the left were piles of stocks, as if someone had pulled up a truck and just dumped them out. Pete had apparently thrown everything in piles after he had taken what he wanted. Jim was amazed at how many there were; on first glance, he guessed at 10,000 even after Pete and several others had taken out large amounts as far back as the 1960's.

As Jim walked up to the barn he saw a stock lying in a mud puddle. He picked it up and wiped it off. It was in great shape and had a beautiful EMcF cartouche. Inside the barn, the center area was Garand wood just tossed all together. In the back were 1917 Enfield stocks that all seemed to be warped. Jim guesses that there were about 4,000 Carbine stocks and perhaps slightly fewer Garand stocks.

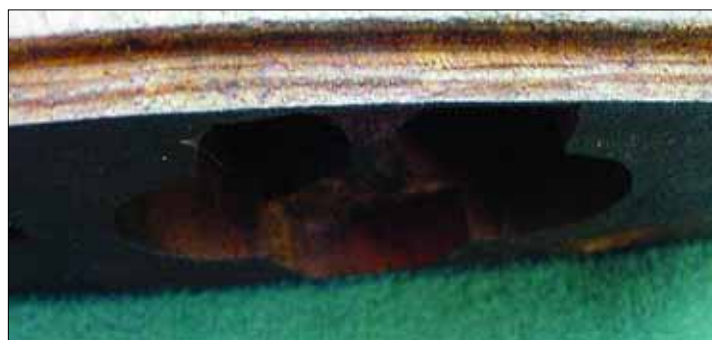
Edith Berkoff met with Jim and explained how Pete Michaels had bought several U-Haul trailers of wood from her. She wanted Jim to buy all of the remaining wood, but since he was unemployed, he knew he couldn't afford it. Edith told him that Pete was paying \$1.00 a stock, and she just wanted everything gone. Jim asked her how much for everything, but was thinking if it is a dollar a stock he was in trouble, as there were thousands. Edith asked what he would pay for all of them, and Jim responded the he would like to buy a bunch and guarantee he would come back to buy more once he had raised more money from sales. He would repeat this until he had bought everything. She looked at him and said, "How does \$1,500 for everything here sound?" Jim got a warm feeling and a smile he had to hide while agreeing to the deal. He headed home and found a partner to help with the money and the work.



This one looks like it was modified with a bayonet!



When a stock is routed for the new butt plate but not recut for the new flat profile and longer side flange, it leaves a small gap where the solid butt plate was counter-sunk at the toe of the stock. This "bird's mouth" is clear evidence of a hasty modification. Complete reshaping of a no-trap stock to accept the new butt plate included enlarging the step to accept the longer side flange of the trap door plate. A line can often be seen halfway down the wall of the new longer step where the old shallow step ended.



The stocks were not horrible, but Pete Michaels had taken most of the best ones, leaving Jim with those that needed more work (and a few good ones that he had missed). Many had been modified for trap in different ways. Jim was smart enough to take things he knew would sell for good money if fixed. He took quite a large amount of wood but left what was considered scrap at the time. Today it would be something I would love to save and bring back to life.

My Entry

Jim and his partner contracted to have the remaining wood repaired, but issues soon developed with sanding of inspectors' marks and poor quality work. An agreed separation was drawn up, and they parted ways. Jim put the wood away for the time being and figured it was his retirement plan. Garand prices were starting to climb, and he would repair them later when prices would be even higher, but he did continue to sell the nicer ones to recoup his money. Jim also bought the last 16 solid butt plates left at Numrich for \$4.00 each to put on the early wood he had found.

In the late 1990's, Jim saw me displaying my repaired stocks at the Ohio Gun Collector's show. I usually had a crowd of people around, because I was always willing to help someone repair wood and was handing out sheets on how to refinish wood at home. Jim stopped by a few times to see my work and finally asked me over to his table.



Large hole over small hole with simple routing that looks as if it was done with a Forstner type drill bit.



Similar routing hacked at to make room for the butt plate hinge at the edge.

We discussed his sending me a batch of stocks to see how well I repaired those he thought were pretty bad. I shipped them back, he was obviously pleased, and we made a deal. This was the biggest reason I have dug so deeply into records on wood, and help as best I can in providing counsel to those wondering about their stock markings. I made plenty of mistakes in the early years by being too excited. With so much coming in at one time, I often forgot I wasn't that good all the time. Now a bit more seasoned, I'm trying to slow my decisions on real or fake, and I have a pretty good hold on details. The issue here is that the technology of the fakers is getting better and, without a hands-on examination, photos can be hard to decipher. A high resolution picture on today's LCD monitors, however, is pretty revealing, in my opinion.

The nice thing is that my records have helped when a stock I worked on comes back around with a fresh stamping on it. I pull my photos out and look at the grain's fingerprints and my data sheets to show a customer the results. If you think this is no big deal, ask those who have saved thousands of dollars. With real, unmodified, early stocks reaching \$5,000 and more, it is good to help people look for signs of forgeries, like length, signs of work on the rear ends, and mismatched inspection stamps. Once the price is high enough on any item, the fakes will show up.

A big problem is false allegations that a double stamp or inspection stamps with no dirt are fakes, or how half of a stamp's being crooked is fake, when these are all common things that I found on original stocks. Undersize heel overhang is another issue, since the sanding operation was done before the stamping, and suppliers weren't keen on tossing wood. But that is another story from lessons I learned by being lucky enough to see plenty of very rare and early wood, thanks to Jim and Robert. Many friendships and some hardships developed from this long episode.

Other Details

Much of the Barn Wood had orange chalk marks on it. No-trap stocks without butt plates, for example, had an orange circle or square around the lightening holes. Other damaged areas were chalked to show why it was being rejected. Characteristics of early M1 stocks were at last recognizable in many ways, compared to anytime before Pete found the barn. Previously, there weren't many examples to compare, and most who had a rare early rifle were not willing to let you take it apart to look over the wood.

According to all those who were involved in digging through the original trove, there were no NFR marked stocks found in the entire barn. Very few GAW's were found, either. This would suggest that the wood came from rebuilding rifles made prior to about mid-1944, even though the wood was mostly bought by Mr. Berkoff after WWII. He was buying on a regular basis and loading the barn up over time.



Most stocks were marked with orange chalk where repair or modification was needed. This one shows an early, simple modification.

Conclusion

Jim Yokum's early wood is gone by now, sold to the many collectors who began restoring early rifles when the Civilian Marksmanship Program sales exploded and Internet collectors forums educated them on what to look for.

As stated, Robert Seccombe recognized many distinguishing features of this early wood, and my database was largely due to the wood from the barn. Robert also found the WRA/WB double-box that few in his group of friends and collectors had heard of at the time.

No one remembers where the barn is anymore. It has probably been razed for city sprawl. It was a place where animals were raised for food and land was used to hunt, where an ice-cold glass of sun tea or fresh-squeezed lemonade was sipped on a hot summer day, or a hot cup of coffee was drunk after loading up the wood stove while looking out the window at a cold winter's morn. A man was making a living off his land the hard way, the old way. I wonder if Mr. Berkoff ever thought his name would be remembered? Well, I can bet he never thought of the Barn Wood story or the way he affected the collecting world. I know for sure he didn't think some guy in Cleveland would be so taken aback every time he opened another box of stocks from his time capsule. Or tracking down so many people to find their parts in the story and then putting it on paper. If he only knew, he may be proud and I hope he really can look down from above and smile at all the happy people who now own his scrapped wood.

Special Thanks to Robert Seccombe, Pete Michaels, Jim Yokum, George Apgar, and Billy Pyle for all their help on this story (that I could still write more about).



Author in his stock workshop.

IN MEMORIAM

GCA member John Yambor, Jr. died of leukemia on February 7, 2009 at the age of 49. He was a dedicated and advanced collector of the M1, especially early Winchesters, and had a noteworthy collection. John provided some of the photos for this Barn Wood article. The GCA mourns his loss and extends heartfelt sympathy to John's family.