

The Merkel Story (Part 1—Nr. 204)

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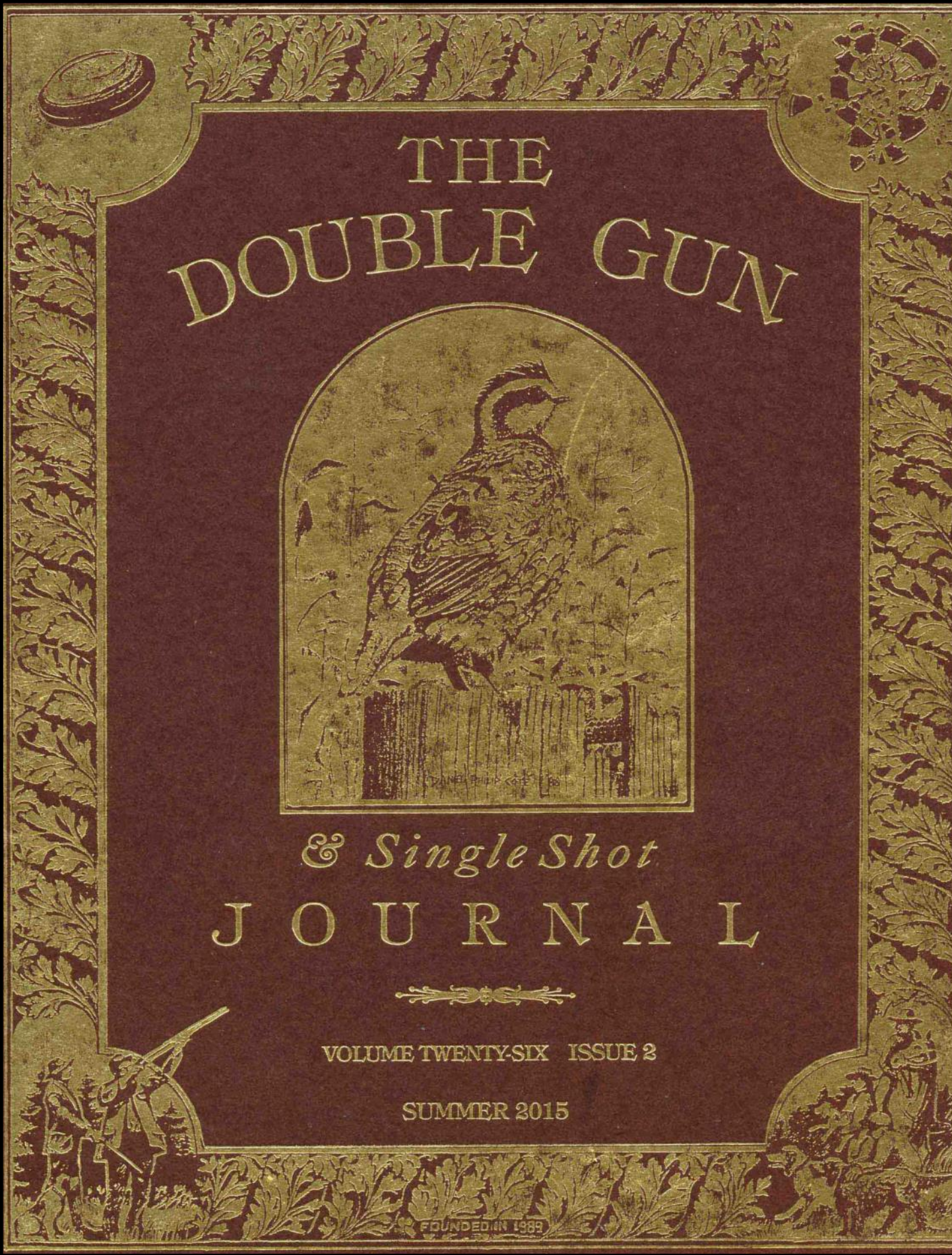
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THE
DOUBLE GUN



& Single Shot
JOURNAL



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FOUNDED IN 1989

The Merkel Story

Part II



—by J. E. Fender—

A major outlet for Merkel double guns was Austria, which had itself been subject to Allied Occupation for ten years following the end of World War II. The end of the Allied Occupation, and a revitalized economy thanks to the Marshall Plan, resulted in Austria's becoming a neutral nation on the Swiss model—and a country with a flourishing firearms' industry. Merkel double guns could legally be sold in the West if the sales were channeled through Austria. Some Austrian gunsmiths fitted the Merkel over-and-under shotgun platform with barrels of their own manufacture, with impressive results. Page 122 of the 1956 issue of the *Gun Digest* illustrates a Merkel 304 with six sets of barrels. Barrel sets in .375 H&H Magnum, .30-06, 7mm, 20 bore and a second set of 12-bore barrels were fitted by Marholdt of Innsbruck to the Model 304, which of course retained its set of original 28" 12-bore barrels. It is not too much to say that whoever owned this Merkel was prepared for any type of game bird or animal on any continent.

But communism was collapsing under the weight of its corruption, inefficiencies, and the aspirations of increasingly sophisticated captive peoples who knew better lives awaited outside their "workers' paradise". Borrowing liberally from poet T. S. Eliot, the communist world ended

"not with a bang, but a whimper." Under the slogan "We are the Nation" the citizens of East Germany liberated themselves from over 40 years of oppression—but like all people suddenly released from imprisonment, the people of East Germany stood tremulously on the threshold of freedom—what did the future hold? How would they earn their livings?

For the employees of Merkel, the way to the future appeared in the person of Donald F. (Don) Wood, a native Alabamian. Don's father had started a small boat chandlery located near the Birmingham airport, and named it Aeromarine. Don joined his father in the business, which prospered, and grew to include a retail firearms' division. The retail firearms' division obtained exclusive rights to import the Austrian-made Steyr firearms' line, which was spun off from Aeromarine and operated under the name Gun South Incorporated, or GSI. (Declaration of Interest: your correspondent has known Don Wood and members of his GSI team since GSI's inception, and has the greatest respect for Don's business and personal ethics.) Don had a good friend, Otto Repa, who owned the highly regarded and innovative Rudolf Bock quick-detachable scope mounting system (which GSI imported). Otto Repa had earlier worked for

Custom Rifle—Model 161

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firearms landed on the unloading dock of GSI's Trussville, Alabama, facility. For the next decade GSI would sell almost one-half of Merkel's yearly production of firearms.

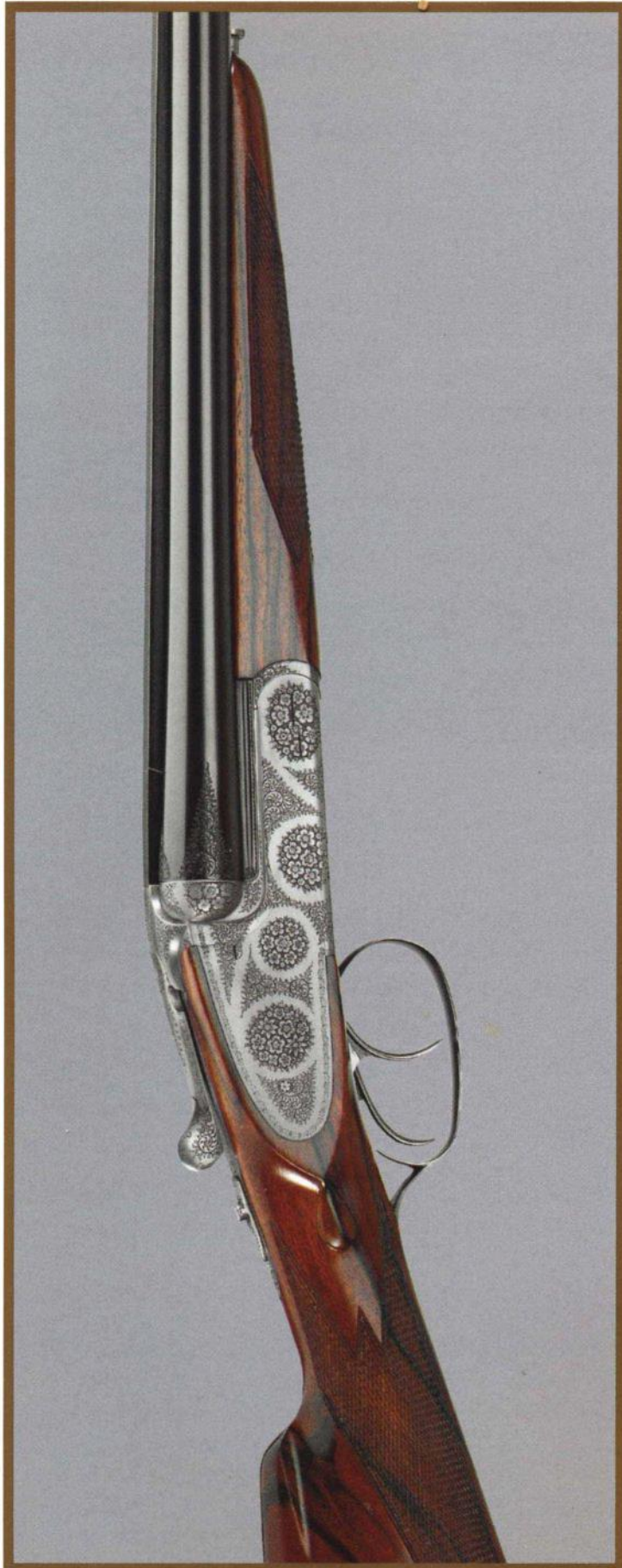
There is also a connection between GSI and Merkel all the more remarkable since it has never been noted. The famous Merkel trademark is an armorer at his anvil hammering a billet of steel into a sword blade, with the inscription *Suhl seit 1490* ("Suhl since 1490"—some versions show the date as 1535) on the base of the anvil. Trussville is a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama's largest city, and some 20 miles south of Trussville in a park atop Red Mountain is the city's symbol of Birmingham, the 56-foot high, 60-ton statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of the fire and forge holding aloft a spear point. The statue was Birmingham's entry for the *1904 World's Fair* in Saint Louis, Missouri, as a tangible demonstration of the mineral riches (coal and iron ore) and manufacturing capabilities of the Birmingham area. Though thousands of miles apart, Suhl and Birmingham are connected by a shared history of metalworking.

But then, the conundrum of finances was lurking in the shadows. Merkel was a newly privatized business entity, but one with manufacturing equipment that was new in 1935, a workforce greatly reduced from the bloated staff of the East German era, but Merkel still had a payroll to meet, and suppliers demanding to be paid for their raw materials and services. As Don Wood recalls, after being launched into the competitive world by the Treuhand, Merkel was initially purchased by a Swiss Holding Corporation. Then ownership was transferred to a Dutch Company for a brief period. In 1995 the Austrian company Steyr-Daimler-Puch purchased Merkel, but over a period of several years ending in 2001, the various components of this large corporation were sold off or acquired new owners. The international conglomerate that owned Heckler & Koch also acquired Merkel, but over time this conglomerate's product orientation concentrated more on the lucrative military and police firearms' market. Through all these tumultuous ownership changes and policy shifts Merkel



Models DF 50F Robertson & DB 160 (below)





retained its customary resilience and focus on the highest standards of building the company's basic products—fine double guns and drillings. Merkel was a profit center for each of its owners.

Then in 2007 Merkel was purchased by the Abu Dhabi investment company Tawazun Holding. Abu Dhabi is one of the seven emirates comprising the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This acquisition was not as incongruous as it might seem at first blush. The Arab countries have a long history of hunting (while the evidence indicates the art of hunting with falcons originated in Mesopotamia, historical evidence also shows that falconry was widespread on the Arabian Peninsula by the 7th century CE), and many Emirati people are enthusiastic hunters. The Emirati also understand that the enormous wealth of their hydrocarbon-based economy will diminish over time as hydrocarbon reserves are extracted. The Tawazun Web site, although obviously created by a high-priced public relations firm skilled in the “advertising-speak” of saying a lot but imparting little of moment states that “Tawazun Holding is a strategic investment firm that focuses on the long-term development of Abu Dhabi’s manufacturing and technology capabilities and knowledge-transfer with a specific focus on the defense sector.”

Reading between the lines, however, it is obvious that the Emirati, who are well aware they live in a dangerous corner of the world, are seeking profitable long-term business relationships that will help them retain their sovereignty. Having toured the Merkle Jagd-und Sportwaffen GmbH facility in Suhl and spoken at length with company management, your correspondent came away with the impression that Tawazun had invested and continues to invest a great deal of capital in its wholly owned subsidiary. The facility, located in an industrial park, is modern, airy, well-lighted, and equipped with the latest state-of-the-art computer-numerical-controlled (CNC) machinery—all carefully and constantly monitored.

A group of approximately fifteen people from around the world, sales agents and technicians undergoing a course of basic firearm maintenance techniques, was touring the facility the same day as your correspondent. In a room filled with CNC machinery operating at capacity, but without the obvious presence of a supervisor, one of the visitors opened the outer door of an operating machine. Virtually instantaneously, a supervisor who had been monitoring the entire room from a control center was at the visitor's side to close the door and gently admonish the visitor before the visitor could open the inner door. Your correspondent was able to talk with any employee, and everyone was enthusiastic about his or her work. The approximately 190 employees working on the premises may take their lunch breaks in a well appointed cafeteria that provides meals at company-subsidized prices.

Current Merkle firearm production actually involves two lines. One is the traditional over and under and

Model DF 50F Robertson

German students in the vocational education stream learn their vocation as apprentices. Merkel competes with other industries for highly talented craftsmen and women skilled in producing high-precision mechanical components, and the fact that Merkel can readily employ all the craftspeople needed for production work indicates that Merkel's wage rates are very competitive. But for the *Meisterstück* line, gunsmiths and engravers are absolutely necessary. Suhl hosts Germany's only gunsmithing and engraving schools, and Merkel is able to draw highly skilled artisans from both schools. Merkel employs up to ten full-time engravers who work their magic in quiet and clean ateliers flooded with natural sunlight.

All of the wood Merkel crafts into buttstocks and fore-ends is sourced from Turkey in various grades of walnut. Merkel goes through some 15,000 blanks of wood in the course of a year. As do other top-tier gunmakers, Merkel operates a Custom Shop where virtually any accoutrement or embellishment may be crafted to the individual client's requirements. A client must arrange his or her visit to Suhl via a member of the Merkel dealer network, but the client will be free to select wood, discuss the client's specific requirements with the Merkel design team, and review with an engraver the specific motif the client wishes to develop.

Merkel Jagd-und Sportwaffen GmbH is certainly a highly valued profit center for Tawazun Holding. While Merkel representatives politely declined to provide your correspondent with sales figures, any reader of the *Double Gun Journal* with Internet access can find Merkel's sales figures at *Bloomberg News*. Although no descendants of brothers Albert Oskar, Gebhard, or Karl Paul Merkel have been affiliated with the gunmaking firm bearing the family name since 1948, your correspondent can attest that the successors to their venerable and honored name enshrine and enhance the heritage of building the best firearms possible bequeathed to this eponymous company by the founders—best firearms that also perform flawlessly when one's life is on the line.

Editor's Note: See Part I of "The Merkel Story" in the *Double Gun Journal* Winter 2014, Volume 25 Issue 4.



Models 2003E & DB 160 (below)

