Armed America

The Remarkable Story of How and Why Guns Became as American as Apple Pie

CLAYTON E. CRAMER

Nashville, TN
2006

NELSON CURRENT
A Subsidiary of Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Guns and Sport in the Early Republic

The accounts that this chapter examines are chronologically organized. In every region in the period 1789 through 1846, memoirs and traveler accounts either treat gun ownership as common, or explicitly tell us that it was common. Some imply, while others clearly state, that hunting was common throughout the United States, and nearly universal on the frontier. No account that I found even implied that hunting was unusual or rare. There is no evidence that hunting was in any sense an upper class phenomenon; many of the accounts are explicit that it was common or nearly universal among the lowest classes.

Excluded are accounts that describe clearly atypical occupations and travels, such as George Frederick Ruxton's *Life in the Far West*, describing fur trapping in 1847 Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado, and John Palliser's *Solitary Rambles and Adventures of a Hunter in the Prairies*. Ruxton's book is awash in guns and violence; Palliser's 1847 hunting trip is similarly awash in guns and hunting. Both books take place within the United States, but where few Americans—other than the Indians—yet lived.[1]

Isaac Weld's account of his travels in North America between 1795 and 1797 described how rifles worked for his British audience, who would have been unfamiliar with rifled weapons. Weld told how

> An experienced marksman, with one of these guns, will hit an object not larger than a crown piece, to a certainty, at the distance of one hundred yards.

> Two men belonging to the Virginia rifle regiment, a large division of which was quartered in this town during the war, had such a dependence on each other's dexterity, that the one would hold a piece of board, not more than nine inches square, between his knees, whilst the other shot at it with a ball at the distance of one hundred paces. This they used to do alternately, for the amusement of the town's people, as often as they were called upon. . . . Were I . . . to tell you all the stories that I have heard of the performance of riflemen, you would think the people were most abominably addicted to lying.

Weld discussed the manufacture and use of rifles for hunting, and compared Canadian hunters to their American counterparts: "The people here, as in the back parts of the United States, devote a very great part of their time to hunting, and they are well skilled in the pursuit of game of every description. They shoot almost universally with the rifle gun, and are as dexterous at the use of it as any men can be."[2] The difference between Americans and Canadians, according to Weld, was that Americans used American-made rifles, and preferred smaller calibers.

Francis Baily's *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled Parts of North America in 1796 & 1797* is awash in accounts of guns and hunting, including not only his own guns and hunting, but those of Americans whom he met. Baily described an "excellent tavern" on Chesapeake Bay, "which is frequented by parties in the shooting season, for the sake of the wild fowl with which the Susquehannah so plentifully abounds . . . ." Long Island's villages, according to Baily, "are much frequented by different parties from New York [City], which go over to hunt, shoot, and fish . . . ."

Washington DC was still largely woods when Baily visited it. To emphasize how far the new capital had to go before it would be a large city, Baily reported, "Game is plenty in these parts, and, what perhaps may appear to you remarkable, I saw some boys who were out a shooting, actually kill several brace of partridges in what will be one of the most public streets of the city." It was not boys out shooting that was remarkable to Baily; what was significant is that they were shooting in what would be one of the main boulevards of America's capital.

Baily described Fredericktown, Maryland, as a "large and flourishing

place" at which, "There is a large manufactory of rifle-guns carried on here; but so great is the demand for them, that we could not meet with one in the whole place; they sell in general from 15 to 25 dollars each, according to their style of being mounted." Over the mountains, Baily came to Hagerstown, which "like Frederick's-town, is a place of great trade, and also a manufactory for rifle-guns, of which we bought two at twenty dollars each."

Baily's trip down the Ohio River described how each day his party moored their boats, "so that there were fourteen or fifteen of us in company: and we every day sent out some of them into the woods with their guns to hunt for deer, turkeys, bears, or any other animals fit for food." Baily described a plantation in the wilderness from whom they asked for food, that "they were, in fact, in the same destitute situation in which we were—obliged to depend upon their guns for subsistence . . . ." After a serious boat accident, his party became more desperate for food. "Accordingly, we took it by turns to go out every morning with our gun and shoot whatever we could find; and many a time would we lay ourselves down at night without a prospect of anything wherewith to break our fast the next morning, save what our guns might procure us the next day . . . ."

Baily's description of frontier Kentucky emphasized hunting as a source of food. "The inhabitants live a great deal upon deer and turkeys, which they shoot wild in the woods . . . ." Baily went hunting there with a Dr. Bean: "We were mounted on horses, and had each a gun . . . ." Baily described how black bears were hunted in Kentucky by cutting down trees into which the bears had climbed, "and three or four of the party with loaded rifles" would shoot the bear as he climbed out of the fallen tree. Baily also made casual references to guns, such as an old man "accompanied by his dog and his gun," and how, as his party floated down the Mississippi, the first boat in the expedition fired a gun as a signal to the others.[3] Baily was certainly surrounded by guns, and by hunting.

Fortescue Cuming's *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* described his journey through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky from 1807 to 1809. Throughout his journey, Cuming mentioned, with no surprise, widespread use of guns for sport, subsistence hunting, and self-defense. Cuming also distinguished between market hunters, and those hunting to feed themselves; subsistence hunting was common. In Kentucky, Cuming, like Baily,

described how abundant the wildlife of the area remained, even after settlement, by reporting "that little or no bread was used, but that even the children were fed on game; the facility of gaining which prevented the progress of agriculture . . . ."[4]

Even though Cuming was a hunter, he expressed his admiration for the superior marksmanship of Western Pennsylvanians and Virginians:

> Apropos of the rifle.—The inhabitants of this country in common with the Virginians, and all the back woods people, Indians as well as whites, are wonderfully expert in the use of it: thinking it a bad shot if they miss the very head of a squirrel, or a wild turkey, on the top of the highest forest tree with a single ball; though they generally load with a few grains of swan shot, with which they are equally sure of hitting the head of the bird or animal they fire at.[5]

When Aaron Burr was tried for his criminal conspiracy to detach the Southwest into its own country, one of the pieces of evidence used against him was a meeting of a Mr. Blannerhassett with a number of other conspirators—all of them armed. Burr's defense attorney argued that gun ownership was the norm in the early Republic:

> Arms are not necessarily military weapons. Rifles, shot guns and fowling pieces are used commonly by the people of this country in hunting and for domestic purposes; they are generally in the habit of pursuing game. In the upper country every man has a gun; a majority of the people have guns everywhere, for peaceful purposes. Rifles and shot guns are no more evidence of military weapons than pistols or dirks used for personal defence, or common fowling pieces kept for the amusement of taking game. It is lawful for every man in this country to keep such weapons.[6]

Rev. William C. Smith's frontier account, *Indiana Miscellany*, described settlers who were heavily armed with guns for self-defense against Indians. Smith also described the morality of the early Indiana settlements by telling how "it was a rare thing to hear . . . the report of a hunter's gun on the holy Sabbath day . . . ." Smith's statement thus implied that during the rest of the

week gunfire was *not* rare. During the War of 1812, Smith told of a shortage of provisions for the settlers, who had fortified their villages,

> but usually they had plenty of meat. All the men were excellent hunters—some of them real experts. The country abounding in game, they kept the forts well supplied with venison and bear-meat. . . . When considered at all admissible to venture outside the fort to labor, the men went in company, taking their trusty rifles with them. . . . Some of [the women] could handle the rifle with great skill, and bring down the game in the absence of their husbands . . . .[7]

Baynard Rush Hall's memoir of frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816) contained detailed descriptions of how hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh meat at very little expense:

> Let none think we western people follow rifle shooting, however, for mere sport; that would be nearly as ignoble as shot gun idleness! The rifle procures, at certain seasons, the only meat we ever taste; it defends our homes from wild animals and saves our corn fields from squirrels and our hen-roosts from foxes, owls, opossums and other "varmints". . . . The rifle is a woodman's lasso. He carries it everywhere as (a very degrading comparison for the gun, but none other occurs,) a dandy [carries] a cane. All, then, who came to our tannery or store came thus armed; and rarely did a customer go, till his rifle had been tried at a mark, living or dead . . . .[8]

After listing a variety of wild game that were hunted in the forest, Hall lists, "Add—'the neighbours' hogs,'—so wild and fierce, that when pork-time arrives, they must be hunted and shot, like other independent beasts." Hall's many hunting references with guns (usually with rifles) suggest it was ordinary.

Hall used the imagery of guns to describe the height of the trees in the forest: "till their high heads afforded a shelter to squirrels, far beyond the sprinkling of a shot-gun, and almost beyond the reach of the rifle!" In describing how life on the frontier expanded a person's talents relative to those who

stayed in the East, Hall compares the double-barreled shotgun with the rifle, common in his region: "Does the chap shoot a double-barrelled gun?—so can you, if you would—but transcend him, oh! Far enough with that man's weapon, that in *your* hands deals, at your will, certain death to *one* selected victim, without *scattering* useless wounds at a venture in a little innocent feathered flock."[9]

Hall's America was steeped in a gun culture. Hall devotes an entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

> Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated . . . .[10]

Hall also described target shooting matches as common, and took pride in participating in a match where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the ground. The local blacksmith was also a rifle-maker, and according to Hall, his rifles were better than those made back East.[11]

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience: "My friends and neighbours don't you all shoot the rifle in this settlement?" They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but they understood the preacher's analogy to a rifle match. Hall also described Pittsburgh, in a whimsical style with literary allusions, as a place where guns are made: "[S]ome here make tubes of iron, with alternate and spiral 'lands and furrows,' better by far to shoot than Milton's grand and unpatent blunderbusses . . . ."[12]

Hall described a non-lethal hunting accident—and gave no indication that this was a shocking event. Hall referred to pistols on several occasions with no indication that they were either rare or regarded with any particular concern.[13] Yet Hall's references to pistols were far exceeded by his mentions of rifles and shotguns.[14] Hall's discussions of hunting, use and misuse of guns,

and target shooting occur on at least seventy-seven pages of Hall's book, or twelve percent of the total volume, and are always treated as common events.

Abraham Lincoln's autobiographical sketch, prepared in 1860, described his family's movement from Kentucky to Indiana around 1816, and how, "A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log-cabin, and A[braham] with a rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack, and killed one of them." Lincoln did not continue as a hunter, but even in his family, which was not wealthy by any means, there was a rifle, and hunting was considered an appropriate action for a seven-year-old. A poem by Lincoln, "The Bear Hunt," apparently written in 1847, described, "When first my father settled here, / 'Twas then the frontier line: / The panther's scream, filled night with fear / And bears preyed on the swine. / But wo for Bruin's short lived fun, / When rose the squealing cry; / Now man and horse, with dog and gun, / For vengeance, at him fly." Another line of the poem refers to "Bang,—bang—the rifles go."[15] Hunting and guns were apparently common on Lincoln's frontier.

Pim Fordham's account of his arrival at St. Vincennes, Indiana, in 1817 described what was considered appropriate paraphernalia for traveling in the Indiana wilderness: "We were furnished with guns and tomohawks, and all things necessary to encamp in the woods . . . ." Fordham also described Indiana's "back-wood settlers, who are half hunters, half farmers."[16] He divided the frontier population of Illinois into four categories, of which the first two relied upon hunting for their survival:

> 1st. The hunters, a daring, hardy, race of men, who live in miserable cabins, which they fortify in times of War with the Indians, whom they hate but much resemble in dress and manners. . . . But their rifle is their principal means of support. They are the best marksmen in the world, and such is their dexterity that they will shoot an apple off the head of a companion. Some few use the bow and arrow.
>
> 2nd. class. First settlers;—a mixed set of hunters and farmers. . . . [17]

Fordham's letter to his brother back in Britain described his style of dress when traveling, and it suggests that this was the norm in Illinois Territory: "I

wish you could see your brother mount his horse to morrow morning. I will give you a sketch. A broad-brimmed straw hat,—long trousers and moccasins,—shot pouch and powder horn slung from a belt,—rifle at his back, in a sling . . . ." Fordham observed that "should a war break out on our frontiers, I hope that there is not nor will be, a young Englishman among us, who would hesitate to turn out with his gun and blanket."[18] Fordham assumed that every "young Englishman" on the Illinois frontier owned at least one gun.

While Fordham described people who hunted at least partly to sell game to others, he also indicated that hunting for one's own table was common. His account of a Christmas Day village feast listed a variety of game being cooked, including wild turkeys. That the game were hunted, not trapped, may be inferred from the following description:

> The young men had their rifles out, and were firing *feux de joi* almost all the preceding night, all the day till late into the evening. It reminded me of Byron's description of the Moslems firing at the feast of the Ramadan in Constantinople—but we backwoodsmen never fire a gun loaded with *ball into* the town,—only from all parts of it, out towards the woods.[19]

Fordham fills his account with descriptions of settlers (including himself) engaged in hunting for sport and for food. Most significantly of all, with respect to the supposed rarity of firearms in America, Fordham wrote a letter to his brother telling him what he should bring to America, and what was not needed: "Do not bring with you any English rifles, or indeed any firearms but a pair of pistols. A good rifle gunlock would be valuable."[20] While pistols might be expensive or rare, firearms in general were readily available. It seems likely that guns in America were as cheap, or cheaper, than in Britain. This is somewhat surprising, because Britain, at the time, was a major firearms manufacturing nation.

Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama discussed the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events, incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also referred to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car.[21]

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's 1818 journey through the Ozarks also provides evidence that firearms ownership, sport hunting, and subsistence hunting, were common. Schoolcraft's description of the frontier settlement of Sugar-Loaf Prairie shows that guns and hunting were the norm:

> These people subsist partly by agriculture, and partly by hunting. . . . Hunting is the principal, the most honourable, and the most profitable employment. To excel in the chace procures fame, and a man's reputation is measured by his skill as a marksman, his agility and strength, his boldness and dexterity in killing game, and his patient endurance and contempt of the hardships of the hunter's life. . . . They . . . can subsist any where in the woods, and would form the most efficient military corps in frontier warfare which can possibly exist. Ready trained, they require no discipline, inured to danger, and perfect in the use of the rifle.[22]

At least some of Sugar-Loaf Prairie's hunting was commercial fur trapping, and so perhaps this was atypical of the region—but Schoolcraft's description of other frontier settlements shows that hunting was a common part of how settlers obtained their meat. By the time frontier Ozark children reached fourteen years of age, they "have completely learned the use of the rifle, the arts of dressing skins and making [moccasins] and leather clothes."[23] Early in his journey, much to Schoolcraft's chagrin, he failed

> to engage our hostess and her daughters in small-talk, such as passes current in every social corner; but, for the first time, found I should not recommend myself in that way. They could only talk of bears, hunting, and the like. The rude pursuits, and the coarse enjoyments of the hunter state, were all they knew.[24]

At one isolated cabin that Schoolcraft and his companion visited, the lady of the house was home alone. Schoolcraft expressed amazement that the lady of the house instructed Schoolcraft and his companion not only about "errors in our dress, equipments, and mode of travelling," but also "that our [shotguns] were not well adapted to our journey; that we should have rifles . . . ." Schoolcraft and his companion were astonished "to hear a

woman direct us in matters which we had before thought the peculiar and exclusive province of men."[25] Ozark women as hunters surprised a New Englander like Schoolcraft, but his comments also imply that what was surprising was the sex of his instructor, not widespread hunting and firearms.

New Yorker John Stillman Wright's acidic *Letters from the West* (1819) described the early farmers of southern Indiana as, "mostly, of indolent slovenly habits, devoting the chief part of their time to hunting, and drinking whiskey . . . ."[26] While Wright was not explicit that these farmers hunted with *firearms*, he was explicit that hunting was *not* an upper class phenomenon in southern Indiana, nor was it rare. Richard Flower's *Letters from the Illinois* described the 1820–21 Illinois Territory. At the frontier village of Albion, Sunday amusements included that "the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport . . . ."[27]

A circa 1820 Du Pont gunpowder packaging illustration for Hagley Mills (as Du Pont gunpowder was marketed after 1814) also suggests that the market for gunpowder included some significant numbers of hunters. While not conclusive evidence, the hunter's attire suggests a rustic, not a member of the upper class:[28]

As we saw in chapter 11, merchants advertising gunpowder gave indications that hunters were a significant market for gunpowder: "Eagle Powder, for Sportsmen, Coarse and Fine, for Land or Sea shooting . . . ."[29]

William N. Blane's ***An Excursion through the United States and Canada, during the Years 1822–3*** mentioned guns and hunting on at least twenty-two pages. On the road across the Appalachians, he described his first encounter with rifles in the hands of some hunters: "As one of them, an old man, was boasting of his skill as a marksman, I offered to put up a half-dollar at a distance of fifty yards, to be his if he could hit it. Accordingly, I stepped the distance, and placed the half-dollar in the cleft of a small stick, which I thrust into the ground. The hunter, slowly raising his rifle, fired, and to my great astonishment, struck the half-dollar."

Rifles were common in the backcountry. "Go to what house I might, the people were always ready to lend me a rifle, and were in general glad to accompany me when I went out hunting." Blane described squirrel hunting with an American on an island in the Ohio River, and how the Americans were in a losing battle to exterminate them: "In parts of Ohio, the people attempted to destroy them by means of guns, dogs, and clubs. One party of hunters, in the course of a week, killed upwards of 19,000 . . . . The people are very fond of the flesh of the squirrel, roasting it, and making it into pies, soups, &c . . . ."

Blane's description of the backwoodsmen observed, "Every boy, as soon as he can lift a rifle, is constantly practicing with it, and thus becomes an astonishingly expert marksman. Squirrel shooting is one of the favorite amusements of all the boys, and even of the men themselves." Blane wrote an additional two pages about the impressive marksmanship skills of the backwoodsmen, remarking, "in these immense forests, where every tree is a fort, the backwoodsmen, the best sharp shooters in the world, constitute the most formidable military force imaginable."

Americans hunted birds as well, and Blane described the normal procedure by which Americans hunted the prairie grouse: "They are delicious eating, and are killed in great numbers by the unrivalled marksmen of this country. After driving up a flock of these birds, the hunter advances within fifteen or twenty yards, raises his long heavy rifle, and rarely misses striking the bird on the head." After admitting that he was not as good a shot, and had to resort to shooting the prairie grouse through the body (instead of the head), he writes, "the Backwoodsmen regarded my unsportsmanlike shooting with as much contempt, as one of our country squires feels, when a cockney shoots at a covey of partridges on the ground." Blane also described the astonishment when he informed Americans that British game laws prohibited hunting deer in public lands, and even limited hunting on one's own land to the wealthy: "Such flagrant injustice appeared to them impossible . . . ."[30]

Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach visited America in 1825 and 1826. Bernhard mentioned Americans hunting on only eighteen pages, but he always treated it as an unremarkable event.[31]

Sandford C. Cox's *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* describes 1820s and 1830s Indiana, using the journals and memoirs of the early settlers, who used guns for hunting, self-defense, assisting law enforcement, and for criminal purposes. Firearms and subsistence hunting are so common in Cox's book that there is no point in giving page numbers, nor do the journal-keepers and memoir-writers show any surprise about the presence or use of guns.[32]

Philip Gosse, an English naturalist visiting Alabama in the 1830s, provided one of the more complete descriptions of the attitude of the population towards hunting and firearms:

> Self-defence, and the natural craving for excitement, compel him to be a hunter; it is the appropriate occupation of a new, grand, luxuriant country like this, and one which seems natural to man, to judge from the eagerness and zest with which every one engages in it when he has the opportunity. The long rifle is familiar to every hand; skill in the use of it is the highest accomplishment which a southern gentleman glories in; even the children acquire an astonishing expertness in handling this deadly weapon at a very early age.[33]

Gosse's account also emphasized the high level of marksmanship in America:

> But skill as a marksman is not estimated by quite the same standard as in the old country. Pre-eminence in any art must bear a certain relation to the average attainment; and where this is universally high, distinction can be won only by something very exalted. Hence, when the young men meet together to display their skill, curious tests are employed, which remind one of the

> days of old English archery . . . . Some of these practices I have read of, but here I find them in frequent use. "Driving the nail" is one of these; a stout nail is hammered into a post about half way up to the head; the riflemen then stand at an immense distance, and fire at the nail; the object is to hit the nail so truly on the head with the ball as to drive it home. To hit at all on one side, so as to cause it to bend or swerve, is failure; missing it altogether is out of the question.[34]

Gosse also described widespread hunting of squirrels, wild hog, and varmints with rifles. Alabamans hunted for sport, food, and to protect crops from damage.[35]

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Journey to America*, his account of the travels that led to writing *Democracy in America*, quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

> [T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting. . . . There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.[36]

Tocqueville also described a usual "peasant's cabin" in Kentucky or Tennessee: "There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a newspaper . . . ."[37] Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

Robert Baird's *View of the Valley of the Mississippi* reads like a real estate promotional guide, emphasizing the enormous benefits from moving to these largely unsettled states—but still admits some unsavory aspects of the frontier. A few instances of violence appear in Baird's promotional work, such as St. Louis and its dueling problem, but they are usually in conjunction with a positive statement such as, "A great moral change is, however, going forward here." Baird also reported a dispute at cards aboard a steamboat: "Pistols and dirks were drawn!"[38]

While booster Baird seldom mentioned violence, he repeatedly mentioned hunting—and in a manner suggesting that the abundance of game would be an important factor when deciding where to settle. Baird wrote of

Michigan's advantages, saying that, "The wild game of this territory is similar to that of Indiana, and the adjoining unsettled parts of Ohio. Deer, bears, beavers, otters, wolves, foxes &c. are numerous. Geese, ducks, and other aquatic fowls are exceedingly abundant. Wild [turkeys], pheasants, prairie hens, &c. &c. are to be found in great numbers and afford delicious food to the settlers in the autumn and winter."

Baird made similar remarks about the wild game of Illinois, Missouri, and Florida. In Missouri, Baird told of the abundance of game, describing a "semi-barbarian population" that lived off the game: "I have seen some of these men who could spend hour after hour in detailing their achievements with the 'rifle.'" Baird also describes steamboat passengers, including "the half-horse and half-alligator Kentucky boatman, swaggering, and boasting of his prowess, his rifle, his horse, and his wife."[39]

Harriet Martineau's account of mid-1830s America shows that firearms and sport hunting were common occurrences along the Mississippi, and unsurprising to her:

> While I was reading on the morning of the 12th, the report of a rifle from the lower deck summoned me to look out. There were frequent rifle-shots, and they always betokened our being near shore; generally under the bank, where the eye of the sportsman was in the way of temptation from some object in the forest.[40]

"Christmas shooting" took the same place on the frontier that Christmas caroling did in the America of my youth. Gert Göbel's description of the Missouri frontier in the 1830s tells us that at Christmas, there were no religious observances, and no gifts exchanged:

> There was just shooting. On Christmas Eve, a number of young fellows from the neighborhood banded together, and, after they had gathered together not only their hunting rifles but also old muskets and horse pistols from the Revolutionary War and had loaded them almost to the bursting point, they went from house to house. They approached the house as quietly as possible and then fired a mighty volley, to the fright of the women and children, and,

> if someone did not appear then, another volley no doubt followed. But usually the man of the house opened the door immediately, fired his own gun in greeting and invited the whole company into the house. . . . After everyone had chatted for a little while, the whole band set out for the next farm, where the same racket started up anew. In this way, this mischief was carried on until morning, and since, as a rule, a number of such bands were out and about, one could often hear all night the roaring and rattling of guns from all directions.[41]

Accounts of similar practices—apparently of German origin—appear in many states, both frontier and settled, in the 1830s.[42]

Rebecca Burlend's narrative of the Missouri frontier in 1831 described bird hunting, and implied that it was not only common among British emigrants, but also among Americans. Her husband had successfully hunted a turkey—or so he thought. Rebecca had it mostly cooked for Sunday dinner, when their guest arrived and expressed surprise, "as those birds are difficult to obtain with a common fowling-piece . . . ." Mr. Burlend had bagged a vulture, not a turkey—definitely not fit for the table![43]

Frances Wright is certainly one of the most extremely pro-American British visitors of the early Republic, and her claims should be regarded with greater care than many of the other visitors. Nonetheless, her assertion, "Every man, or nearly every man, in these states knows how to handle the axe, the hammer, the plane, all the mechanic's tools in short, besides the musket, to the use of which he is not only regularly trained as a man but practised as a boy" suggests that the use of firearms in America was widespread, even granting a large dose of romantic hyperbole on Wright's part.[44]

The Anglo-Irishman Thomas Cather described emigrants headed to the frontier while crossing Michigan in 1836. Rifles were the norm, not the exception:

> [E]migrants from the old states on their way to settle in the Western forests. Each emigrant generally had a wagon or two, drawn by oxen. These wagons contained their wives, children, and *rest of their baggage*. The man walked by the side of his team with his rifle over his shoulder . . . .[45]

British naval officer and novelist Frederick Marryat's account of his journey to North America described North Carolinians emigrating west in 1837:

> These caravans consist of two or three covered wagons, full of women and children, furniture, and other necessaries, each drawn by a team of horses; brood mares, with foals by their sides, following; half a dozen or more cows, flanked on each side by the men, with their long rifles on their shoulders; sometimes a boy or two, or a half-grown girl on horseback.

Marryat's account of his journey frequently mentioned Americans hunting and shooting in a way that suggests that there was nothing particularly unusual about it. He described how hunting was the "principal amusement of the officers" at Fort Snelling. Captain Scott, one of those officers, had a reputation as a very great marksman, based on his ability to throw two potatoes in the air and puncture both of them with a single rifle bullet. Nor was Captain Scott's hunting a peculiarity of Fort Snelling being on the frontier. Marryat recounted Scott's hunting anecdotes as a 12-year-old in Vermont, and these accounts indicate that both hunting and gun ownership were common in Scott's youth in Vermont.[46]

British emigrant Caroline Kirkland's 1839 *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* shows that guns and sports involving guns were widespread on her frontier. Discussing the problems of church attendance, "many of the neighbours always make a point of being present, although a far greater proportion reserve the Sunday for fishing and gunning." Kirkland mentions long guns, pistols, and hunting in a manner that suggests that they were normal parts of frontier life. Hunting was unremarkable; Kirkland commented on a neighbor whose husband's love of hunting left her alone and neglected. She also reported that in the woods, "The division of labour is almost unknown" and "in absolutely savage life, each man is of necessity his own tailor, tent-maker, carpenter, cook, huntsman, and fisherman . . . ."[47]

Harriet Williams Sawyer of Maine described 1840 Indiana life. Unlike Rev. William C. Smith's somewhat earlier version of Indiana, Sabbath-breaking was a problem:

> The Sabbath in the West is much desecrated; trades are transacted; labor, it is true, is generally suspended, but the Sabbath is regarded by most as a day of recreation. Hunting and intemperance are common.[48]

John James Audubon's *Delineations of American Scenery and Character* described a society awash in guns and hunting. Audubon described traveling along the Ohio River: "The margins of the shores and of the river were at this season amply supplied with game. A Wild Turkey, a Grouse, or a Blue-winged Teal, could be procured in a few moments; and we fared well, for, whenever we pleased, we landed, struck up a fire, and provided as we were with the necessary utensils, procured a good repast." Audubon's preparations for a trip in the forests of Pennsylvania, included "25 pounds of shot, some flints . . . my gun *Tear-jacket*." The result? "The juicy venison, excellent bear flesh . . . that daily formed my food, methinks I can still enjoy." Audubon described what this area must have been like before settlement: "Bears and the Common Deer must have been plentiful, as, at the moment when I write, many of both kinds are seen and killed by the resident hunters." Audubon witnessed an incident in which eight bears wandered into a clearing, driving away the woodsmen: "Down they all rushed from the mountain; the noise spread quickly; rifles were soon procured and shouldered; but when the spot was reached, no bears were to be found . . . ."[49]

Audubon's chapter on "Navigation of the Mississippi" described how boatmen would stop along the way when logs blocked their path: "The time is not altogether lost, as most of the men, being provided with rifles, betake themselves to the woods, and search for the deer, the bears, or the turkeys, that are generally abundant there." The flood stage of the Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers trapped "Bears, Cougars, Lynxes, and all other quadrapeds that can ascend the trees . . . ." The animals were "[f]atigued by the exertions which they have made in reaching the dry land, they will there stand the hunter's fire, as if to die by a ball were better than to perish amid the waste waters. On occasions like this, all these animals are shot by hundreds."[50]

Audubon described a squatter's cabin, and how squatters, "like most of those adventurous settlers in the uncultivated tracts of our frontier districts . . . [are] well versed in the chase, and acquainted with the habits of some of

the larger species of quadrapeds and birds." Audubon went cougar hunting with a party of squatters. "Each hunter now moved with caution, holding his gun ready . . . ." Audubon told of a young couple's home in the backwoods, and while he emphasized how their clothes and their furniture were "homespun" and "of domestic manufacture," but a "fine rifle ornamented the chimney-piece."

Audubon described another family in the Louisiana bayous, but in this case, it was comprised of runaway slaves. Their food supply came from wild plants and deer: "One day, while in search of wild fruits, he found a bear dead before the muzzle of a gun that had been set for that purpose . . . . His slave friends at the plantation supplied him with some ammunition . . . ."[51]

In a chapter about how the burning of forests changed the nature of the trees that grew there, Audubon told of an immense forest fire in Maine, and how the settlers responded to the fire that awakened them one night: "We were sound asleep one night, in a cabin about a hundred miles from this, when about two hours before day, the snorting of the horses and lowing of the cattle which I had ranging in the woods suddenly awakened us. I took yon rifle, and went to the door to see what beast had caused the hubbub . . . ."[52]

A chapter on Kentucky sports described how Virginians moved into the Kentucky frontier: "An axe, a couple of horses, and a heavy rifle, with store of ammunition, were all that were considered necessary . . . ." Kentucky sports included target shooting with rifles, and Audubon spent four pages describing sport similar to Gosse's account of "driving the nail" that we examined in chapter 13.[53] (This was apparently not a new practice, nor specific to the New World. *Mourt's Relation*, published in 1622 concerning Plymouth Colony, used this target shooting practice as a metaphor for his writing: "though through my slender judgment I should miss the mark, and not strike the nail on the head . . . ."[54])

Audubon was clearly a gun enthusiast. When a new acquaintance offered to show him the new percussion cap method of firing a gun, Audubon was keen to see it. His friend demonstrated that it could fire under water by loading and firing it in a basin of water—inside the house. Guns were a fundamental part of how Audubon was able to produce his beautiful works on natural history: "I drew and noted the habits of every thing which I procured,

and my collection was daily augmenting, as every individual who carried a gun always sent me such birds or quadrapeds as he thought might prove useful to me."[55]

Audubon devoted a whole chapter to "Deer Hunting" with rifles, distinguishing "Still Hunting" from "Firelight Hunting" and "Driving." "*Still Hunting* is followed as a kind of trade by most of our frontier men. To be practiced with success, it requires great activity, an expert management of the rifle, and a thorough knowledge of the forest . . . ." Another section described alligator hunting: "A rifle bullet was now and then sent through the eye of one of the largest . . . ." Audubon devoted an entire chapter to "The Moose Hunt" in 1833 Maine, and of course, the hunt was with guns. Similarly, an entire chapter is devoted to "A Racoon Hunt in Kentucky" using rifles, with a detailed and picturesque description of rifle loading.[56]

Another traveler to America was Ole Rynning, who wrote that those considering immigrating to American should bring "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."[57] Rynning is clear that one should bring guns both to sell (indicating that there was a demand for guns in America), *and* because one would need them here.

Charles Augustus Murray's description of his hunting trip from Britain to America in the 1830s reported that both firearms ownership and sport hunting were common in rural Virginia. Murray was explicit that these hunters were ordinary farmers, and not members of the upper class:

> I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, "I guess I could beat you to a mark."[58]

The frontier, of course, would have more reason for firearms ownership than settled areas of the East, but even from the most settled parts of pre-1840 America we have ads, memoirs and travel accounts that show gun ownership

and hunting was unremarkable. Jonathan Vickers advertised in a Cleveland newspaper in 1821 that he had opened a "Gun Factory" where "New Rifles and Fowling Pieces will be furnished cheap, for cash . . . ." Another ad in the same issue lists, "Best Eng. Powder, Com. Amer'n [ditto] Shot & Lead."[59]

Charles H. Haswell's *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* described New York City life from 1816 to 1860. Haswell's entry for November 1830 told of shooting a "ruffed grouse" at 144th Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan, "and it was believed by sportsmen to be the last one to suffer a like fate on the island." Haswell also described the opening of commercial hunting clubs on Manhattan. This suggests that sport hunting on Manhattan was already common[60] at a time when Bellesiles argues that sport hunting was still unusual in America.[61]

The sources from the early Republic provide persuasive evidence that firearms and hunting were the norm and not the exception. To demonstrate that America was *not* a society awash in guns and hunting would require not just a new interpretation of the existing evidence—it would require rewriting dozens of eyewitness accounts.