

Great Guns in Fine Country Jarrett Rifles

and
Cowden Plantation
Part 1

Story and Photos
by
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“A wise man said that a man is entitled to one great rifle in his life.”

Jim Carmichel, Shooting Editor
Outdoor Life Magazine

I have been day dreaming about getting a great rifle for over a decade. Sure, realistically, I guess I’ve got more than enough guns right now—rifles, shotguns, handguns. Sure, my latest purchase of a pair of classic Savage 99 rifles in near mint condition took up most of the remaining space in my gun safe and all of my gun budget. But what’s reality got to do with dreaming?

My great rifle is not going to be listed in *The Shooter’s Bible* with all the Remingtons and Rugers. What I want is a rifle that beats hands down any rifle the big manufacturers could ever hope to make. I want an extraordinary rifle like nobody else’s, a custom rifle built just for me, the one rifle that I want to pass on to my grandkids.

Above all, I want tack-driving accuracy. I’m a hunter, not a target shooter, and every hunter knows he owes his quarry as perfect a shot as he can make. The shots

a hunter remembers most aren’t the ones that were dead on; they’re the ones that weren’t.

I even know where to get my great rifle, the same place where my dreams began a decade ago—Jackson, South Carolina, home of Jarrett Rifles and Cowden Plantation. I first heard about a guy they were calling The Baron of the Beanfield in the late ‘90s. That was the nickname an outdoors writer dropped on Kenny Jarrett, a custom rifle maker who was becoming known for producing rifles

that could drill a penny at 300 yards. That’s the kind of accuracy you need to hunt white-tails in the sprawling South Carolina bean fields, and that’s how Jarrett got his nickname.

The best hunting rifles I knew about at that time might be able to hit a quarter at 100 yards, at least now and then, as long as they were in the hands of a marksman the likes of Davy Crockett. But a penny at 300? I drove down to Jackson to find out what this kind of super shooting was all about.

(above) Looking down a shooting lane on Cowden Plantation



Stock specialist Tony Quarles holds a rifle ready for its action.



Cain Jarrett "laps" a barrel to polish away minute imperfections. (Photo courtesy of Jarrett Rifles)

Jarrett Rifles

When Kenny Jarrett started Jarrett Rifles nearly 30 years ago, he already had a pocketful of bona fides. He was a benchrest shooting champion with a slew of world records to his credit—and he made his own target rifles to win those awards. But Jarrett was also a hunter, had been since growing up along the Savannah River on Cowden Plantation. Which is what prompted him to set an unheard-of goal: to build a hunting rifle with the accuracy of a superb target rifle.

Target-rifle accuracy is achieved by shooting light bullets at slow speeds out of cannon-thick barrels. Field-weight hunting rifles shooting hefty slugs at super-fast speeds had the power to knock down an animal weighing a ton but nowhere near the accuracy. Target-rifle accuracy with knock-down power? They said it couldn't be done, so Jarrett went out and did it.

Jarrett started off making his own barrels because he didn't have much of a choice if he wanted to get the extreme accuracy he was after. He found that the best commercial barrels he could buy at the time often varied as much as 5/10s of a thousandth of an inch from breech to muzzle.

Not good enough. Picture a bullet traveling down such a barrel like a rookie bobsledder banging the walls while coming down the course and careening out of the chute in the opposite direction of his last big bump to who knows where. Jarrett's standard was to make barrels with bores varying less than 1/10 of a thousandth of an inch. With such barrels he could build rifles that would consistently place bullet after bullet within a half-inch circle at 100 yard. The best off-

the-shelf rifle might be able to put bullets in a one-inch circle at that range, twice as big a group as a Jarrett rifle.

In practical hunting terms, a Jarrett rifle can make the difference between a clean hit and a botched shot at 300 yards, 400 yards and beyond. For a hunter like me, the advantage may be more psychological than technical: You have total confidence that your rifle will do exactly what it is supposed to do – up close or way out there. You feel relieved of the hunter's worst nightmare, a botched shot that inflicts pain caused by a rifle that didn't hit where it was aimed. You know the gun will do its part if you do yours.

Today, Jarrett barrels are made from the best stainless steel in the world with machines capable of surgical precision. But the key to their extraordinary quality comes down to true craftsmanship in the lapping process. Lapping is a way of polishing the bore to be absolutely free of imperfections. At Jarrett Rifles they do it the old way because it's still the best way. A lead slug covered with polishing compound is run back and forth through the bore from 1,100 to 1,300 times *by hand*. The lapper knows he's got it right when it "feels right" and then uses an air gauge to verify that it meets the 1/10-of-a-thousandth standard.

The Gray Ghost in .300 Jarrett with Swarovsky 4-16X scope



Four Models

Jarrett rifles come in four standard models. First is the Signature Rifle, which is the culmination of everything that Jarrett has learned about the rifle-making craft over 30 years. It's the Jarrett rifle you're most likely to see from the U.S. to the Yukon to Africa and Tibet, as the photos lining his office walls attest. Second is the Windwalker, which features a tapered barrel and slim action to cut down on weight for hunters who climb mountains for sheep and goats. Third is the Professional Hunter and the name says it all—the special purpose rifle for hunting the world's most dangerous game. Finally there is the Original Beanfield Rifle—if you supply a suitable action, they will fit it with a custom barrel and tune it to perfection.

Calibers and stock choices are too numerous to be listed here but can be seen on the Jarrett Rifles website. It's a customer-driven company so they'll pretty much build whatever the customer wants, but only if the final product meets Jarrett Rifles' standards for quality and accuracy.

Tuning for Accuracy

No matter how precise the manufacturing process, every rifle – whether a Jarrett or any other – is as different from the next as a fingerprint. Therefore they shoot differently, even though they were made identically. Each Jarrett rifle goes through a final tuning process the likes of which no other gun maker undertakes. Tuning involves working up individual loads for each rifle and firing up to 200 rounds until it consistently puts each and every bullet within half an inch at 100 yards. No rifle leaves the shop unless it achieves that level of accuracy. Other gun makers may claim such accuracy, but Jarrett Rifles proves it on the range and sends the rifle's new owner load data and the last three targets showing the groups achieved.

The final product comes with a remarkable guarantee. If you are dissatisfied



Kenny Jarrett with a Signature Rifle and his children (from left) Jay, Rissa and Cain
(Photo courtesy of Jarrett Rifles)

for any reason – for any reason whatsoever – within the first 30 days, you get your money back, all of it. There's a story going round about a guy who returned his rifle for a full refund because it shot consistent sub-half-inch groups but the shapes were more like three-leaf clovers than the triangles he was after.

Under One Roof

On a recent visit I found that Jarrett Rifles has taken even greater steps to insure rifle quality. Now all rifle components are made under one roof. Instead of buying the best actions and stocks available to mate with Jarrett barrels, they now make their own. Their new Tri-Lock receiver is made with CNC machinery right next to the barrel room, just up from the area where both are bedded in Jarrett-made stocks. Since they no longer rely on other suppliers' products, Jarrett Rifles is best described as a custom rifle manufacturer, not a custom rifle builder. Jarrett highlights the

advantages of having things done right from the start with a homespun analogy: "It's better, and easier, to raise a child right to begin with than to try to correct an adult."

These days Jarrett has his family as well as his business under one roof. Jarrett Rifles is now a family affair. His oldest son Jay has taken over day-to-day operations, daughter Rissa runs the office and son Cain is a barrel maker, the Jarrett most likely to be found at the lapping station. I asked Jay what it was like to work with a father who is the best in the business and not the kind of man to withhold his views on how to do things right. He thought for a moment and then answered. "Well, working with family can be the best or the worst way to make a living, but it works for us. The boss and I don't always agree on everything, but that's just fine. The way I see it, if we agreed on everything all the time, one of us don't need to be around." Jay got his father's wit as well as his job.



The author's three-shot group at 100 yards

The Gray Ghost

Jay was showing me proper bench rest shooting technique out on the range behind the shop where all rifles get their final tuning. He was using the Gray Ghost, a house gun used during shooting schools or loaned to a customer while his own rifle was being built. The Gray Ghost is one of the Signature Series, a ruggedly elegant rifle with a pebbly gray stock and smoke gray finish on the metal. The barrel is tipped with a muzzle brake to lessen the recoil. It's chambered in .300 Jarrett (a specialty round that can handle any creature in North America and most of Africa) and topped with a Swarovski scope that cost more than my first new car. Jay about stopped my heart when he asked, "You want to shoot it?"

I almost said, "No!" I mean, I'm not much of a marksman, and I was afraid something very embarrassing was about to happen, like figuring out what to say if I missed the whole target. I sure couldn't blame it on the rifle.

My first shot was what is called a "sighter," a free shot to give you the feel of the rifle that doesn't count as part of your

group. I was delighted to see that it was on the paper, hitting about an inch or so above the bullseye. But the feeling kind of faded when I remembered the rifle was sighted to hit three inches high at 100-yard distance. I settled down. My next round hit where it should, and the next two went pretty much through the same hole – a three-shot group measuring just over half of an inch! And I knew I could keep punching bullets in the same group all day long. Gen. Norman Swazkopf was right when he said, "Three shots went through exactly the same hole. A Jarrett rifle will spoil you from using anything else." He was talking about himself, but I knew what he meant.

I retrieved my target and couldn't stop grinning over my three-shot group when Jay offered an invitation: "Since you and the Gray Ghost seem to get along pretty good, you might want to take him over to the Plantation this afternoon and see if you can find a nice boar hog." Some days everything is going great—and then it just gets better.

For more information on Jarrett Rifles and

Cowden Plantation see their website, www.jarrettrifles.com. If you're ready for that one great rifle in your life, it'll only take 90 days to build, a bit longer with engraving.

In Part 2, the author carries the Gray Ghost to hunt for wild boar on Cowden Plantation, the 10,000-acre tract along the Savannah River belonging to the Jarrett family.

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