

Airguns, The Story Behind the Book

"The story behind Eldon Wolff's "Airgun" book"

by John Groenewold

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for reprint in the third edition of "Airguns" By Eldon Wolff.

The story really begins in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1902. That is when Rudolph Nunnenmacher's family donated his gun collection to the Milwaukee Public Museum shortly after his death. Along with the collection was a large sum of money to be used to further the collection. Included in the collection were numerous antique air guns. Some of the available money was used over the ensuing decades to purchase additional air guns. There was a second major donation of air guns from the Nunnenmacher family during the 1940's. It was during 1942 and shortly after the second donation that Eldon Wolff decided to start work on an airgun book.

The first correspondence related to research which led to the Airgun book was dated 1942. It was between Eldon Wolff and G. Charter (Nick) Harrison. The subject of the letter implies that the two had previously agreed to collaborate on the preparation of the book. It laid the foundation for how they planned to obtain additional air guns for inclusion in the book, as well as how the research was to be carried out. The contents of this and other letters of the time establish how the Wisconsin Gun Collectors Association was conceived. The Wisconsin Gun Collectors Association was extremely important to the development of Wolff's book "Air guns". It provided an additional base, separate from the Museum that they (Wolff and Harrison) could use to conduct research, obtain air guns, and test theories, etcetera. Many of the members of the Wisconsin Gun Collectors contributed to the book, research, or tracking down specific air guns for use in preparing the book. During the ensuing years many air guns were located by one means or another. Often Harrison, who frequently traveled abroad, would see an airgun in some museum in Europe. He would communicate this to his friend Wolff, who would then contact the museum's curator in his official capacity as Curator of the Weapons Department at the Milwaukee Public Museum and arrange to conduct research, borrow the airgun, or have the curator make crucial measurements, take photographs, etceteras for him. If the airgun could be borrowed, it was often given to Harrison to take back to study. The research involved disassembly and assembly with copious notes, measurements and drawings being made. The literature portion of the research was left to Wolff. Often, a desirable air gun would be available for purchase at an auction or private sale. Wolff, usually left these purchases to Harrison, although many were paid for by the Nunnenmacher fund and became the property of the Museum.

Wolff did not collect guns. He only had a few for his own use. However, Nick Harrison did build a large and interesting collection over the years. These found their way into the book as they were readily available and convenient for researching. Nick became quite ill in the late 1950's and his collection was auctioned off.

Eldon wrote most if not all of the draft of the book long hand. Bob Lietz (long-time friend and Eldon's assistant at the museum) typed most if not all the book. Some of Eldon's correspondence indicates he would send the draft sections of the book to Nick, other members of the Wisconsin Gun Collector Association or other museum curators to review.

No research would be complete without field testing and firing the air guns. This was often accomplished during a visit to a Homer Lynn's farm just north of Milwaukee. Homer was another of Eldon's friends. Testing usually involved Wolff, Harrison, and occasionally members of the Wisconsin

Gun Collectors Association, other Museum staff (often Bob Lietz) as well as family and friends. Roland, Eldon's son, frequently shot black powder guns with Eldon and Ted Meyers (a friend of Eldon's and significant member of the Wisconsin Gun Collector's Association) at balloons hung in trees. Roland remembers blowing up the balloons for use as targets. During these field trips numerous accuracy and power (penetration) tests and comparisons were made. On at least one such trip the power of several antique air rifles was compared to various charges of black powder used in a flint lock rifle. Flint lock guns were really Wolff's main interest. Much of the data resulting from these tests has been lost, but some still remains in the museums' files and Wolff's correspondence. Time permitting it may be the subject of a future article.

Work continued on the book until 1958, when it was published. Harrison and Wolff had a "falling out" in the mid 1950's and that was the end of their friendship and collaboration on the book. Harrison stopped all work on the book and no longer wanted his name associated with it. By the time of the breakup of this unique friendship the field research had been completed. Other members of the museum's staff were occasionally called upon to help in the research or type the manuscripts in an effort to complete the book. Wolff gave Harrison credit for any work he did, as well as recognizing guns from his collection throughout the book.

After the book was published, Wolff was recognized as the country's foremost airgun authority. Apparently, since he enjoyed air guns immensely he did not object to this success. In fact, he continued researching air guns. He even wrote several more booklets and articles on the subject, made a movie and did some television interviews, all related to air guns. Wolff's book has been the best reference of its type. The demand for it has been so great that it was reprinted 2 times once in 1968 and again in 1996.

Wolff retired from the museum in 1969 and died in 1972, at the age of 66 in Milwaukee, WI. Nick Harrison suffered serious health problems beginning in the 50's that lasted many years. He died in 1991, in Whitewater, WI.