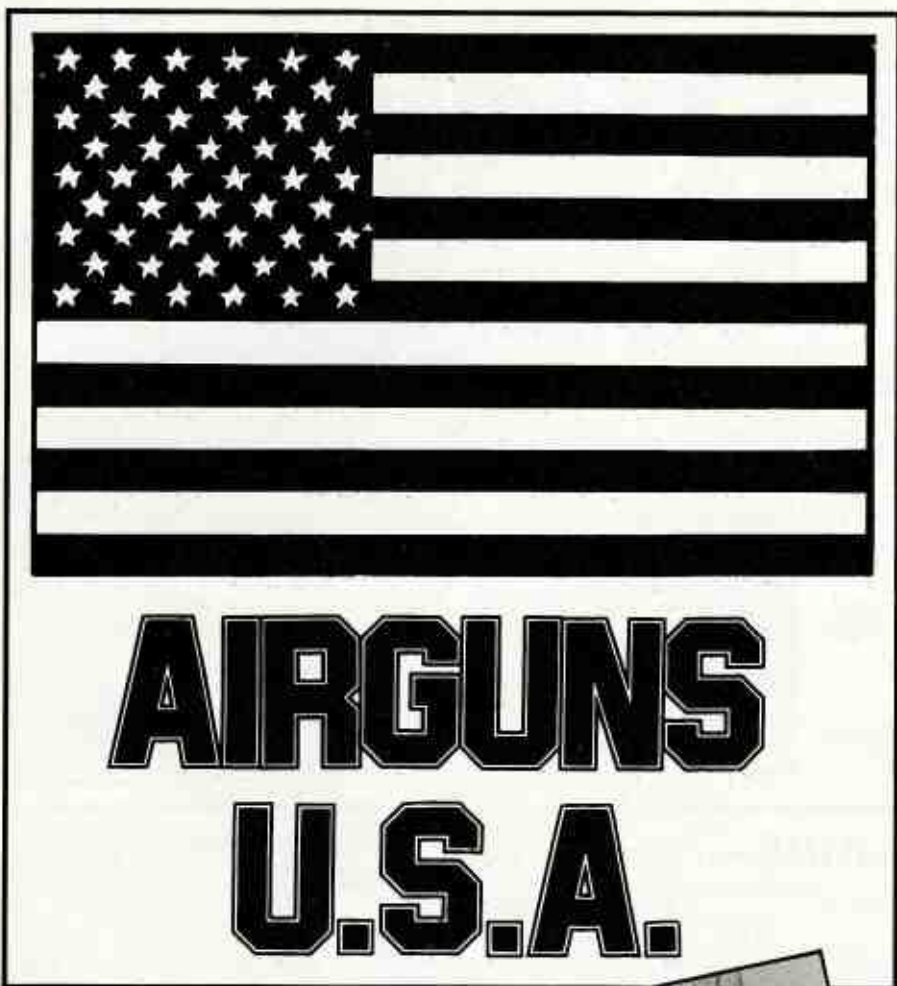
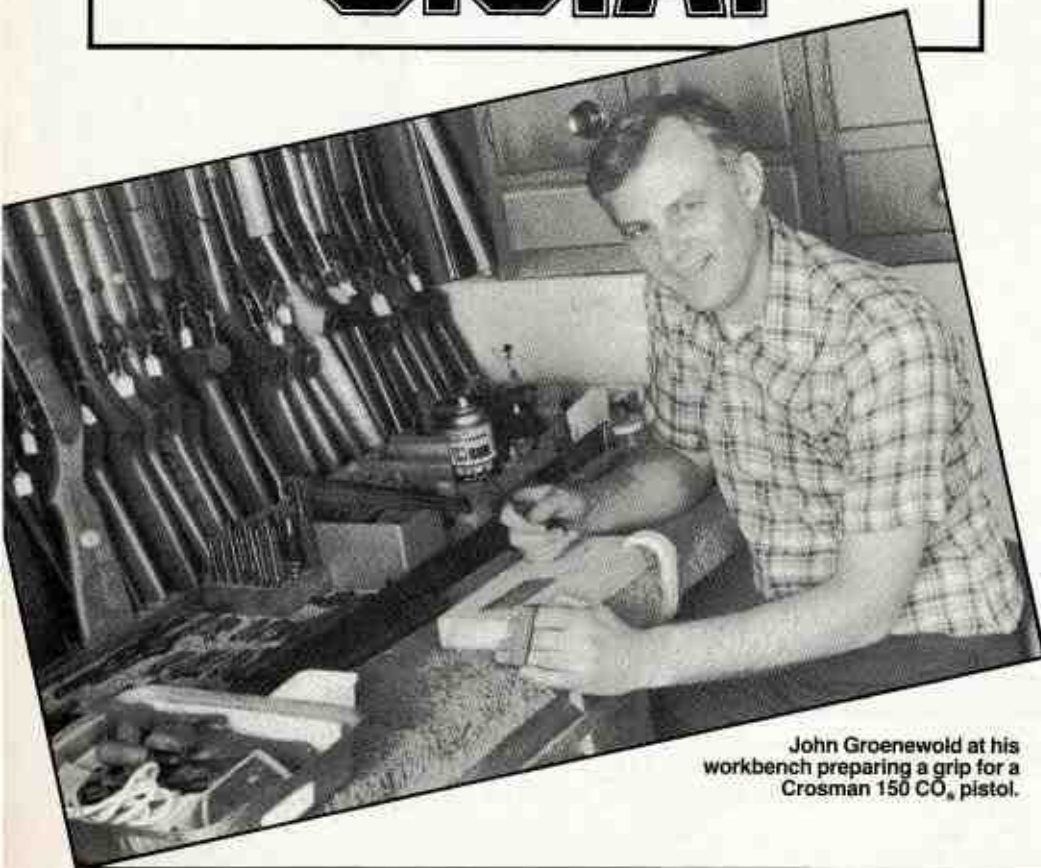


**Tim McMurray and Dennis O'Flaherty  
talk to Quackenbush chronicler John  
Groenewold**

*Photos by Glen Koyama*



# AIRGUNS U.S.A.



John Groenewold at his workbench preparing a grip for a Crosman 150 CO<sub>2</sub> pistol.

Incurably frivolous characters that we are, we have never been able to hear the name 'Quackenbush' without thinking of Donald Duck. Sure, we knew this Quackenbush did have something to do with airguns, but we felt instinctively that somebody with a name like that couldn't be taken too seriously — 'Old Quacker' had probably thought up a magazine-fed bean shooter or something like that.

So much for our unerring instincts, as we discovered when we talked to Illinois airgun collector and historian John Groenewold. Henry Marcus Quackenbush was the man most responsible for putting airguns into the hands of ordinary shooters — the forefather, in fact, of the airgun scene as we know it today!

Up through the late 1800s, the airguns available were of a very high standard of manufacture — complex, finely executed weapons whose price represented months or even years of income for the average person. High-powered pneumatics of the kind which had been made for the wealthy since the 1600s were still being made, the first CO<sub>2</sub> guns were being produced by the Frenchman, Giffard, and spring piston guns were becoming more common in the form of gallery guns of various designs.

However, mass-produced spring-piston guns of the type familiar today, both of the toy and the 'adult' varieties, went into wide circulation only after the way was blazed by the New York inventor with the funny name.

## Joined Forces

Around 1870, Quackenbush began manufacturing toy air pistols based on a patent of his own, and his combination of inventive and manufacturing genius led to an incredibly rapid expansion. By 1874, Quackenbush had branched out into manufacturing his own ammo, coming to grips ingeniously with the lack of standardisation in airgun barrels of the time, and from there he went onto targets and accessories, not to mention one successful rifle after another, including one which could be used with either rimfire ammo or as an airgun!

Later, Quackenbush joined forces with a pair of designers and mechanics named Haviland & Gunn, who had invented an air rifle any *Airgun World* reader would recognise as the Gem. Acquiring the rights to the gun, Quackenbush put it into production and licensed it widely to Germany where it was an enormous success. So much so, in fact, that it's fair to say that the foundation of the German airgun industry, and in particular of the Diana works, stems directly — as W. H. B. Smith says in his *Encyclopedia of Gas, Air & Spring Guns* — from the development and merchandising genius of H. M. Quackenbush and his long-forgotten inventors Haviland & Gunn, with support from the later American 'Daisy'.

Goodbye Donald Duck! We asked John Groenewold — a good-natured sort who didn't hold our ignorance against us — when he would be sharing the details of this saga with the rest of the airgunning world, and he told us that the manuscript of his book was very near completion. We

have, in fact, seen a chapter, and found it a professional and fascinating piece of work.

John has been fortunate enough to receive the assistance of Bronson Quackenbush, the founder's grandson, and has had access to sales ledgers and other company history materials going back to 1871. Beyond that, John has examined some 400-500 Quackenbush guns, taking extensive notes and photographs, so that he expects to be able to identify and describe all ten of the Quackenbush air rifles, as well as the pistols and cartridge rifles, in one book.

John's only problem remains that of finding a good publisher because, as scholars like Dennis Hiller and John Knibbs can readily attest, the profits from sales of books about airguns are too small to make most publishers eager to get involved. We're keeping our fingers crossed, as the idea that there is only one first-class monograph in the entire field of air rifle production — John Knibbs' book on BSA — is one we find ridiculous!

Moving onto our favourite interview question, we asked John how he first became interested in airguns, and received an interesting variation on the familiar story of boyhood involvement.

In John's case, the passion had its roots in the gift of a field-grade shotgun when he was 16. When he proposed to his Dad the idea that he be allowed to have a go at chequering it, John was told to get himself something a bit cheaper on which to practise!

After John had chequered all the patio furniture, baseball bats and hammer handles he could get hold of, he managed to acquire a Crosman 140 — and there was no looking back! It was the chequering and carving of stocks themselves that were of primary interest to him at first, and the only guns he could afford to work on were airguns.

Bit by bit, as he became more and more proficient at stock work, he found he kept on acquiring airguns anyhow. The bug had done its work, and he was well and truly in the grip of that malady most of us know only too well. In John's case, the means of introduction to airgun collecting has stood him in good stead, as he has been able to trade custom work for guns. Also, in doing chequering, stock repairs and inlays on other people's airguns, he has handled a variety of rare guns he might otherwise never have seen.

The interest in airguns stayed with John through school and a three-year tour in the Navy where he was an electronics Petty

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Officer, but it was only when he settled in Illinois in the early '70s and went to work as an environmental chemist for Kraft Inc. that his airgun collecting really took off.

The key was his business travelling, which took him back and forth across the United States and Canada, letting him meet other collectors and visit out-of-the-way pawn shops, gun shops, sporting good stores and so on. As a result, he found himself absolutely inundated with airguns — poor guy! — in the first few years, and had to limit himself to American

*continued on page 28*



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guns only of the period more or less from the end of the Civil War to the early 1950s. Even so, he has found himself with more than 500 airguns, including Quackenbushes, gallery guns, Sheridans, Apaches, Crosmans, absolute rarities such as the Brown pneumatic pistol — see Wesley's *Air Guns & Air Pistols* for that one — and a variety of others too great to list here.

But although he has acquired many guns, John draws a firm line between being an 'accumulator' and being a 'collector'.

Accumulators serve a necessary and useful role in preserving guns that might otherwise be lost, but John feels that to restrict yourself to this activity alone is to miss out both on the fun and the sense of purpose that are available to the serious collector.

The collector is essentially a scholar,

someone who wants to learn all he can about his favourite guns, about who made them and why they were made that way, about who bought them, what they were used for, and so on. This means incessant correspondence with other collectors, visiting libraries and historical societies, checking files of old newspapers — in short, reconstructing the world in which each airgun originated.

And then, as Larry Hannusch noted in one of our earlier articles, the collector/scholar finds his sense of vocation completely fulfilled when he can publish this information and share it with other enthusiasts. John has already published some excellent studies, in *New Zealand Airgunner* and in American publications, and we look forward to more articles as soon as the Quackenbush book is launched!

Meanwhile, John stays busy with the

other mainstream of his collection-born activities, namely restoring and reworking airguns. With a fully equipped machine shop, including metal and wood lathes, drill press, power saws and so on, John is able to do not only the stock work on damaged airguns, but also all kinds of parts repair and fabrication as well.

### Custom Stocks

His business travels have led him to a number of Crosman, Sheridan, Benjamin and Daisy service stations on the verge of selling out, and his stock of replacement parts is vast. Still, John likes nothing better than fabricating missing parts, whether this means working them up from old patent drawings or simply re-envisioning a missing piece.

Either way, rescuing a gun which was headed for the scrapheap is a source of great satisfaction, as is taking a fine old piece and doing a strictly disciplined restoration job, preserving every possible bit of original finish and material, using original materials only to replace what is missing, and ending up with something as close to what once existed as the materials and techniques of the 1980s will permit.

Equally enjoyable, and giving more scope to the creative instinct, is the work John does with creating custom stocks. He uses walnut, maple and cherry that he has cut himself over the past years, ageing each blank at least eight years before it is used.

Mechanical creativity is indulged, too, as with the Crosman 38C CO<sub>2</sub> revolvers — originally in .177 — which John has re-barrelled in 5 mm. He is helped here by close proximity to the Sheridan/Benjamin factory, where well-established contacts make it possible for him to obtain useful parts and technical advice.

Using only pistols which would otherwise have been destined for the dustbin, John straightens and polishes frames, chromes them, exchanges .177 barrel liners for .20 ones, rebore the revolver cylinder, and ends up with hard-shooting custom treasures!

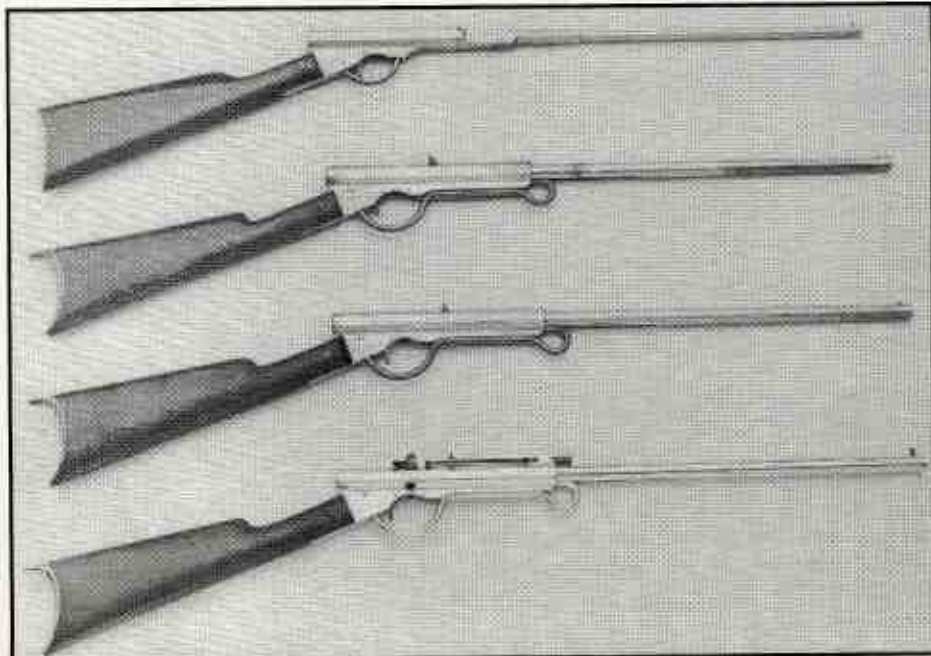
At the moment, John has in the works not only his book on Quackenbush, but also a string of custom grip and stock assignments, a number of Healthways and Plainsman pistols being rebuilt, a project for casting duplicate butt plates for old Quackenbushes, as well as fabricating compression tubes, screws, frame assemblies and so on for a variety of ailing air weapons.

John's two great wishes are never to run out of interesting contacts in the world of airguns, and never to get to the last piece of challenging work. As to the first wish, we can help by encouraging *Airgun World* readers to write to John Groenewold at 427 Emerson Lane, Mundelein, Illinois 60060, U.S.A. — and we would suggest asking about his outstanding bibliography of published materials concerning airguns.

As for the second wish, John seems in no danger of running out of airgun projects of all kinds, and we can only imagine that H. M. Quackenbush, himself a prodigious worker, would have approved of his future chronicler heartily!



Above: An 1895 King single-shot with original plating and mahogany stained cherrywood stock (top), a Daisy No. 12 model 29 (centre), and a Crosman (bottom).



A selection of Quackenbush .210 rifles from John Groenewold's collection.