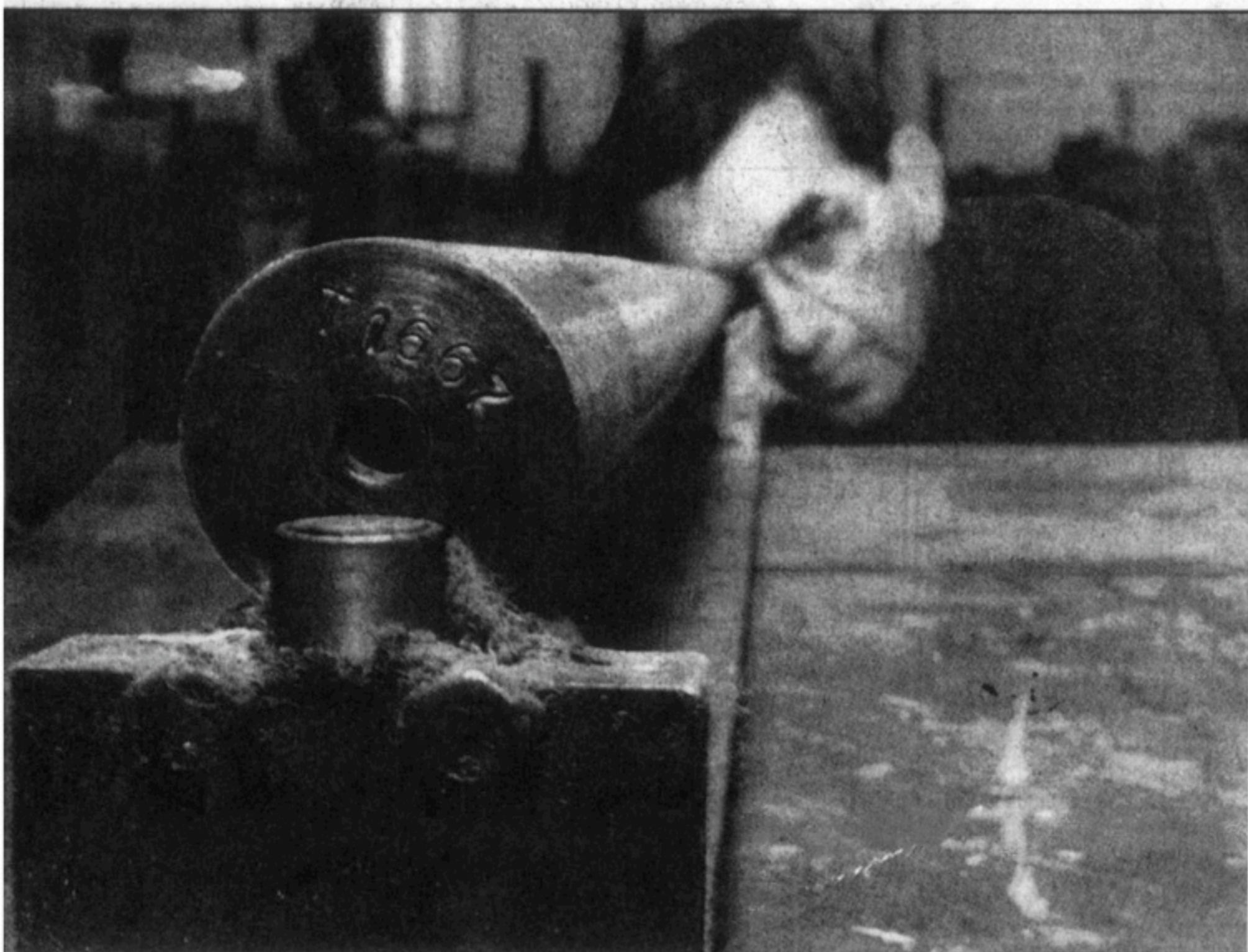


Business EXTRA

Gina Williams • Business Extra Editor • 470-2138

search
/D-8.

A CLOSER LOOK



RANDI ANGLIN/The Post-Standard

Paul J. Hart, owner of Hart Rifle Barrels Inc., peers through one of the rifle barrels his company makes in LaFayette

By RICK MORIARTY
The Post-Standard

Driving up to Hart Rifle Barrels Inc. in LaFayette, you would never guess you're approaching the nation's leading maker of highly accurate rifle barrels.

In fact, it's easy to drive right past it. Its white metal and concrete building sits behind a former rendering plant on rural Jamesville Apulia Road.

Don't look for signs. There aren't any.

But inside, owner Paul J. Hart and his staff of seven make some of the most accurate rifle barrels in the world.

Hart's custom-made, stainless steel rifle barrels are the barrels of choice for competitors in the growing sport of precision target shooting. Members of the U.S. Olympic shooting team have been using them since the 1950s.

Military and police sniper squads, as well as some hunters, also use them.

"Our clientele are pretty much discriminating," said Hart, 57.

Hart barrels are so accurate that, matched with the right rifle in the hands of an experienced shooter, they will put a bullet through a 4-inch-wide paper target up to 300 yards away. Then they will place four more rounds through the hole made by the first bullet.

They have to.

Competitors in precision-shooting contests are judged on how close they come to firing bullets through the same tiny hole at distances of 100 yards, 200 yards and 300 yards. Shooters rest their rifles on benches to steady their shots, a practice that gives the sport its name — "bench rest shooting."

Hart said business has never been better. The company sold about 800 barrels in 1968, when it incorporated. This year, it will sell about 3,500 barrels, including 500 to overseas customers.

At \$235-or-more a barrel, Hart expects his sales to pass \$800,000 this year. He won't reveal the company's profit figures, but says they're good.

"My accountant says we do very well," he said.

Denny P. Andrews of Springfield, Va., president of the National Bench Rest Shooters Association, which promotes precision-shooting competitions, said Hart Rifle and Shilen Rifles Inc. of Plains, Mont., are the country's top makers of highly accurate rifle barrels.

"They've earned a reputation for quality and excellent manufacturing techniques," he said. "You can't get much better than them."

Doug Shilen, vice president of Shilen Rifles, said Hart controls about 50 percent of the U.S. market for rifle

TAKING



Hart Rifle Barrels Inc., based in LaFayette, works at making one of the most accurate barrels in the world.



RANDI ANGLIN/The Post-Standard

Paul J. Hart stands in the shop while one of his employees crafts a rifle barrel. Olympic shooting team have been using them since the 1950s.

barrels used in bench rest shooting, while his company has about 30 percent. Several other companies share the remaining 20 percent of the market, he said.

"Only about six companies have the ability to do it right, and only about three actually do it," he said.

It was that quest for quality that prompted Paul Hart's father, Clyde, and grandfather, Charles, and former Remington Arms Co. employee M.H. Walker of Iliion to start Hart Rifle in 1953.

The Hart family had, since the 1930s, operated a rendering plant, which turned butcher-shop scraps into animal feed. But the Harts and Walker competed in target-shooting matches together for years and found the accuracy of many barrels inadequate.

"They couldn't get a barrel that satisfied them, so they decided to make a few themselves," Paul Hart said.

They soon began winning shooting competitions with their homemade barrels. Competitors took notice and hired the men to make barrels for them, too.

"What started out as a hobby just got bigger and bigger," Hart said. "People saw them win competitions and wanted the same barrels."

Charles Hart died in 1958, and the Hart family bought Walker's share of the business soon afterward.

Despite rising demand for their barrels, Hart said the rendering business remained the family's main occupation for years.

Hart, who began competing in precision-shooting contests when he was 13, said he did not plan to join the family business. However, while studying forestry at Paul Smith's College in Paul Smiths in 1959, he broke his leg skiing, ending his hopes of becoming a professional baseball player.

So he returned home to LaFayette and joined the family's rendering business, becoming its president in 1963.

But his love of shooting competitions did not die. Hart continued to participate in them and even branched off into archery

for a while, winning the state freestyle archery championship one year.

In 1968, he closed the rendering plant and began making barrels full-time.

The company's product is not cheap. Each barrel costs \$235. The price rises to \$450 if you want it assembled on your rifle by the company, but most customers do that them-

Hart Rifle Makes A Shot

(HART, from back page) selves or have a gunsmith do it for them.

But Hart said cost is not a major factor for his customers, many of whom pay gunsmiths up to \$2,500 for a complete rifle. Most of the company's customers are gunsmiths, in fact, although Hart also sells directly to the public.

"When the economy gets down, our business gets better," he said. "When things are tight, people are going to buy what they know works."

Though demand is up, Hart still makes rifle barrels the old-fashioned way — one at a time.

A high-precision drill cuts a hole down the length of a solid, stainless steel rod. A second, finer drill shaves the hole even more, nearly polishing the inside of the barrel. It's that smoothness that helps make the bullet travel straight.

Inside the barrel to make a bullet spin, giving it greater range and accuracy. The barrel then is shipped to a subcontractor, who heats it for three hours at 1,050 degrees to keep it from warping.

The inside is then polished with fine grit using a rod that is pushed in and out by hand.

Finally, they insert a fiber-optic wire to visually check the inside for defects. If they find any, they send the barrel back for more work or throw it out.

"There's no short cuts," Hart said. "Every step has to be done right."

Hart's father died in 1980. But the business remains a family affair.

Its full-time work force consists of his wife, Kay; their son, Jim; their son-in-law, Jack Sutton; and Sutton's brother, Bill. Three part-time employees round out the staff.

Hart said he may retire in a couple of years and turn the business over to his son and son-in-law.

In the meantime, he does not see the company expanding so it can mass-produce rifle barrels.

"The last couple of years has just gotten crazy," he said. "But we can't cut corners, because if we do, we're going to be cutting our throats. The minute you get too big, you can't control the quality."

Hart still attends shooting matches throughout the country. But he said he goes only to compete, not to seek new customers.

In fact, except for an occasional ad in a trade magazine, Hart does no advertising. He prefers to rely on the company's reputation to keep the customers coming.

But after 41 years in business, why still no sign out front?

Simple, he said. Since most orders are taken over the phone or through the mail from out-of-state customers, few people have a need to visit the shop. And Hart said he likes it that way.

"This is such a small place, if we had people coming in all day, we'd never get anything done," he said.

The target

- **Who:** Paul J. Hart
- **Age:** 57
- **What he does:** He is president of Hart Rifle Barrels Inc. in LaFayette.
- **Getting there:** He took over as president of the family-owned company when his father, Clyde, retired in 1963. He turned Hart Rifle into a full-time business after selling the family's rendering plant in 1968.
- **Family:** He and his wife, Kay, the company's secretary and treasurer, have four children — Michelle, 33; Laura, 32; Jennifer, 30; and Jim, 30.
- **Off the job:** Hunting, fishing, golfing and bowling.
- **Philosophy:** "Quality sells itself. I firmly believe that. Too much stuff today is sold on advertising and not on a product."