

JOHN BARTON JR. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DECEMBER 3, 2019

(Luke Cyphers, interviewer)

HOW WAS THE RIFLE IN THE FAMILY?

My great, great grandmother was Minerva Lake Aiken. B. 1812, D. 1897

HOW IS AIKEN SPELLED?

That's a really good question. I've seen four different spellings. There's Aikin. Aiken. Aitkin. Aitken.

And the interesting thing is there are two different spellings, one on the commemorative plaque on the rifle, and another on his headstone. There is really no way of knowing how he spelled it.

The spelling on the plaque is Aitkin. The spelling on the headstone is Aikin. So pick one.

HOW DID MINERVA SPELL IT?

That is a good question. I don't really know. So I think probably, and I talked to Helen about this, but we just decided to pick one spelling.

Anyway, she was married to my great, great grandfather, who was Lyman Barton. There's going to be a lot of confusion about the Lymans.

He was b 1812, and d. 1899.

His son was Lyman Guy Barton. He was born in 1866, d. 1944.

And his son was Lyman Guy Barton Jr. B. 1887, and d. 1968.

And I did know him. I was 13 when he died.

How it originally came to Minerva, there's a little question about this. Martin Aiken, very early in 1828, his brother, Abraham Aiken Jr., born 1788, d. 1877, he was Minerva's father. So Martin Aiken was Minerva's uncle.

So when Martin died in 1828, it may have gone to his father, Abraham, who died in 1835. Or it may have gone to his brother, Abraham Jr. He was born in 1788, and lived quite a long time. He died in 1877. I'm not really sure about this. So after Martin died, it either went to his brother, Abraham the elder, or to his brother, Abraham Jr.

What I'm guessing is after Martin died, it went to his father, Abraham. And then upon his passing, I believe it went to his son, Abraham Jr. I don't really know. Most likely it went to Martin's brother, who was Minerva's father. I'm only guessing about that. It's the most likely path that I can figure out.

So it then went and passed through the Lymans. My grandfather, Lyman Guy Jr., I believe gave it to my father in the mid- to late 1960s.

I know it was in our possession at that point because I do have photographs of the gun in New Jersey, which was where we lived. Old Tappan.

So I know it was in our possession in New Jersey. We moved to Bristol RI right around that same time, the late 60s. It was in my father's possession until 1992, at which point he lent it to the museum.

In NJ and RI, actually it was hanging on the wall. I'm looking at it in a photograph right now. So then we brought it with us when we moved to Bristol.

Pretty interesting for you to know about the Lymans. They were pretty renowned physicians in Essex County. My great grandfather Lyman Guy Barton started his career as a mechanical engineer. And then he became a doctor. He used his mechanical engineering knowledge to invent a whole group of different medical devices. One of which was the Barton forceps, which was an obstetrical device used to help births. And actually we have a textbook written by my great uncle, Frank Gossert, concerning all of his inventions.

And apparently these forceps are still being used. And a lot of the devices were born out of necessity. Being a country doctor, he got tired of doing surgery on the kitchen table, so he devised a foldout surgical table that could be put in the trunk of a car.

He was quite a character. I did not know him. He was kind of a cantankerous guy. He would pull out of his driveway every morning to go to the hospital, and he almost hit someone, and he remarked, Well, everyone knows that I leave to go to the hospital at 7:30 every morning. They should know to get out of my way.

And my father told me that when they were at family gatherings, and the conversation turned to something he was not very interested in, he would turn his hearing aid off.

THAT'S ESSEX COUNTY NY?

I believe his practice was in Willsboro. And I believe it was Lyman Guy, the second Lyman, who moved to Plattsburgh at some point, and had established a practice that was near his house actually on the same lot. He had a separate building constructed for his practice because my great grandmother was tired of hearing screams. This was pre-anesthesia.

They were all known to be very musical individuals. My grandfather was a fantastic piano player, had perfect pitch. And could improvise anything. Apparently he worked his way through Princeton playing piano for the fraternities. I actually have some of the Princeton fraternity songbooks.

The great grandfather played flute. Lyman Guy Jr. Was the pianist.

Back in those days they would set broken bones under a fluoroscope. And my grandfather developed skin cancer on one of his fingers and it had to be amputated. So when he was playing piano and had to use that finger, he would transpose it up or down a key.

He was a very kind quiet, very formal individual. Wonderful with children. A great grandfather.

AND NOT AS CANTANKEROUS AS THE ELDER LYMAN GUY?

No.

SO EACH OF THE LYMANS HAD THE GUN IN THE NORTH COUNTRY. SO THEN IT MOVED TO NEW JERSEY WITH YOUR FATHER?

Yes.

My father moved to NJ in 1955 after going through WW2 and Korea. He was in the 10th Mountain Division. He signed up during the days when they really didn't have capability for mountain warfare, so it was the early days of the 10th Mountain Division. And he was an excellent skier and all-around athlete, and knew a lot about winter survival. I believe one of his first posts was teaching survival school.

We moved to NJ in 1955, he worked in Manhattan in business sales, and then we moved from NJ to Bristol around 1968.

SAME CAREER?

Yes.

DID YOU GROW UP HEARING ABOUT THE GUN?

A little bit fuzzy because I was 12 or 13 when we got the rifle. I remember being told Congress had assigned commemorative rifles, and I knew that Martin Aiken was a relative of mine, but aside from that I did not know the story until much later on in life.

Upon my father's death, I was sort of tasked with dealing with the gun. I was the elected family member to find out where it was going to go. I have two older sisters.

WHOSE DECISION WAS IT TO LEND IT TO CCHA?

My father's and mother's decision.

WHY DID THEY DO THAT?

Well, it was just hanging around the house, and my father knew the importance of the rifle and he felt it needed to be displayed and put in a better place, basically.

I have to tell you, he sort of struggled with it. He was on the fence about whether he was going to sell it to a private collector or in an auction, or donate it. And eventually in his will he made the firm decision that yes, it should be sold.

Thus, that's why CCHA cut a check for \$100.

THAT MUST HAVE BEEN VERY DIFFICULT, AND IT'S INCREDIBLY GENEROUS ON THE FAMILY'S PART. YOU COULD HAVE SOLD IT AND MADE SOME MONEY OFF IT. WHAT WENT INTO THAT DECISION?

Let me tell you the process I went through. My first task was to determine the provenance. So I went back and looked at all my family history and made the determination that Minerva probably got it from her father. So that was the first step.

Then the second step really was to reach out to different auction houses, to find out really, now, what's the story on this.

I contacted maybe five different auction houses and collectors. They all knew about the rifle. Even to the point that they knew of the different spellings of Aiken. So it was in fact what it was.

At some point my father had done similar research, and apparently prior to the auction of another whole rifle, he went through and tried to determine what happened to all of the 17 rifles, and did a pretty thorough job of it. In my father's papers I found a list of all the rifles and where they ended up.

Out of the 17, six were actually awarded in 1826 I think. One of the great mysteries is the remaining 11 rifles, how did they get to the remaining owners?

No one really knows to be honest with you. We've had knowledge that the six that were actually presented to the Aiken volunteers, only 2 are actually known. One is the Henry Averill, and I believe that's the one where the plaque was donated, and then the other is the Martin Aiken rifle.

The Ira Wood rifle, that's the one you have the plaque on.

The Averill rifle is in private hands.

Basically, what went into my decision was, I did research on the Aiken volunteers and what happened, and went through and looked at the proclamation in Congress, which was actually the third time the resolution had been read and debated.

I have the record of the debate that went on, and apparently, the first two time it was read, there was no mention of a commemorative plaque. But the third time the proclamation was debated, they really talked about the importance of commemorating acts of gallantry. And I believe that was why they went to all

the trouble to hire a silversmith to fabricate the plaques and affix them to the rifles.

It was a really different time from what I can tell. People considered themselves citizens of their states and not necessarily as a citizen of the United States. That was part of the problem of there being a very small standing army. We were relying on militias at that point, and quite often they were poorly trained and not particularly motivated. Because at that point, the generation that had fought the revolution was basically gone. There wasn't that sense of patriotism.

And so a lot of New Englanders were making quite a bit of money smuggling and supplying the British in Canada. So there was not a lot of motivation for them to actually engage in this type of fight.

And from what I can tell, the members of Congress were trying to engender patriotism in country itself, and the importance of in preventing enemies of the country from taking over our territory. Because what I learned was that the British were more interested taking over the northern part of New England than they were in taking over the entire country.

So the Battle of Baltimore, the Battle of New Orleans, the burning of Washington, were essentially diversion tactics. Their real prize was to establish an Indian country in the area of Minnesota and to cleave off part of Northern New England, which they intended to be called Columbia as a British protectorate. So the real prize in their minds was to gain control of Lake Champlain, and with that naval control, they would be able to annex the northern part of New England: Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine.

And potentially command the naval access to New York City from the North.

I'VE READ WHERE THIS WAS A CONCERTED EFFORT BY THE GOVERNMENT, TRYING TO MAKE THIS MORE PALATABLE TO PEOPLE WHO HAD JUST BEEN THROUGH TWO GENERATIONS OF BLOODY WARS. DOES THAT SEEM ACCURATE TO YOU?

I believe that's what they were trying to do. And based on all of this, the one rifle that's held by a museum, it's not on display. It's in storage someplace at the Smithsonian.

I decided that this rifle was too important to be left in a private collector's closet someplace. And that was really the motivation that I had to get the rifle donated to the museum.

And it was quite a process I have to say. The probate court in Bristol, RI, required that I get the written permission in the form of a release from all of the

six heirs. So I went to that process. I sent everyone out a letter explaining what my thoughts were, and some of these are cousins that I haven't seen in 50 years. So it was a little awkward, let's put it that way. But they generously agreed, and having that permission in hand, I arranged with Helen for the donation.

THE VALUE OF THE RIFLE ON THE OPEN MARKET TO COLLECTORS ISN'T WHAT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN 10 OR 15 YEARS AGO, IS THAT CORRECT?

That is correct. I got a consensus of sale at auction of \$25,000 to \$40,000, with the possible sale to a private collector for as much as \$80,000.

As part of this process I reached out to one of the auction houses, probably the most preeminent, and they said, we'll send you a catalog right away. I received a three-volume catalogue, which was very glossy, very highly produced, and it must have cost them \$100 to send out this catalog. The firearms that were listed were highly engraved, gold-plated, beautiful works of art essentially.

Something you can imagine a collector would fetishize over.

And then you look at the (poor) Hall rifle which has this simple plaque on it, you could tell this was somehow influencing the value. You could tell the collectors were not as interested in the historical significance of the gun, but more its appearance.

That was one of the other things that motivated me to see that it got to the museum. Because these were simply playthings for the collectors. So that was the other thing that went into it.

GIVEN WHAT THE MUSEUM HAS DONE WITH IT SINCE 1992, YOU'RE CONFIDENT IN OUR CARETAKING ABILITY? AND IF YOU WANT TO ANSWER NEGATIVELY, I'LL PUT THAT IN THE NEWSLETTER, BECAUSE WE'RE DEVOTED TO HONEST HISTORY.

Ha! No, I was very happy. I believe my father was very happy with it. And the other thing is that, when I spoke with Helen, I first spoke with her the summer before last, and she explained to me how important it was to visitors, the historians and scholars. That it was really important to show the rifle, but more important I think was looking at the plaque, knowing it was the only time Congress had issued such a piece of commemorative firearms, there is a story there, and questions that will be asked.

Why did they award this? What happened? What's the story behind it?

And the story is so important, I believe it needs to be told over and over again. So that was really my motivation—to make sure people knew the story behind the rifle, and what a fantastic act of gallantry it was for these kids.

Obviously teenagers think they're going to live forever, but they all could have been killed, realistically.

The militias were outnumbered I think it was 9 to 1, and if the naval battle had gone a little bit differently, it probably would have been a massacre. The naval battle was quite a massacre on its own. I can't believe that they would do that back in those days.

They basically blew each other to bits. And if a couple of things had not gone wrong for the British, we probably would have lost that battle. So it's quite a story.

YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT. AND THANK YOU FOR TELLING THIS STORY. IT BRINGS INTO FOCUS WHY IT'S SUCH A VALUABLE RELIC. THE WAR OF 1812 GETS FORGOTTEN, BUT HAVING SOMETHING TANGIBLE TO SHOW PEOPLE ABOUT THE GALLANTRY OF THESE KIDS IS REALLY IMPORTANT.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE SOMEONE LIKE A MARTIN AIKEN IN YOUR FAMILY TREE?

To know that someone had gone to that length to try and preserve his freedom engenders a sense of patriotism in me. Knowing what my father went through, it assured me that that spirit would be carried on. So it gives me a great sense of pride to know that this happened.

AND YOUR FATHER'S EXPERIENCE IN THE WARS, DID HE SEE COMBAT?

Yes, he did. He was involved with fighting against the Japanese when they were trying to capture the Aleutian Islands, off Alaska. And apparently that wasn't much of a battle, because they had gained intelligence that told them the Americans were going to encounter them. So they had basically left. After that, I believe my father went to officer training school, and therefore missed a lot of the combat that was in Italy at that point.

He came back to Plattsburgh after the war, married my mother I believe in 1945, then they proceeded to have two little girls, and in 1951, the army command knew they were going to be involved in mountain warfare in Korea, so they called my father back. He did not have to go.

He volunteered for Korea, and was involved in quite a bit of action. That was really a hard time for him. My mother always told the story that she almost divorced him when he signed up for Korea. She had these two little girls. I believe maybe 4 years old, and one was less than 1 year old.

So it was quite an act of valor for him to do this. He came back—my father was 6-foot-2. And I believe his healthy weight was about 180. When he came back from Korea he had dysentery, and weighed 120 pounds.

It was really hard for him.

He remained in the Army Reserve until about 1969, I believe. He always told the story that when he enlisted for World War II, he didn't know there were two lines—one for the regular army, and one for the reserve. So he signed up for the reserve and sort of got stuck with it.

NO VIETNAM, THOUGH.

No, they wanted to promote him to colonel, he was a major at that point, and he said, no, I have had enough. Because he was spending his summer vacation going to training. He felt he had done his duty.

He remained very active in veterans affairs, particularly with the 10th Mountain Division.

WELL, WHAT A FAMILY, ALL THE WAY DOWN.

It's quite a history.

ANYTHING ELSE I NEED TO KNOW?

Only that I'm very happy that the gun is where it is. I know it will be cared for, and I know people will ask that question: What happened? So it's in the right place.

THANKS SO MUCH. THAT'S A GREAT WAY TO SUM IT UP.