

COVEY RISE.®



A man with a serious expression sits on a wooden bench in a room with a checkered floor and a magazine rack. He is wearing a patterned shirt and jeans, and is holding a long gun. The room has a rustic feel with a mirror on the wall and a patterned rug.

PRIMARY PLAYER

Steve Barnett and his effect on
the secondary fine-gun market.

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY ALLEN



In Faulkner’s masterpiece *Absalom, Absalom*, Thomas Sutpen migrates to Mississippi in the early 19th Century and builds an empire with his bare hands—along with a preponderance of slave labor and a French architect, but let’s not sweat the details just yet. Spoiler alert: Lots of conflict ensues. Ultimately the last of the patriarchy is burned to the ground by the last of the slaves, and the Sutpen Dynasty returns to ashes and dust. Setting that aside, let’s focus on the building of things from nothing, and let’s set our story, once again, in Mississippi, where the confluence of frontier struggles and Indian lore have given rise to many a tale of success in the face of overwhelming odds. These will return as thematic threads, but for now let’s make our way into the quiet hamlet of West Point, a town of roughly 12,000, nestled in the Golden Triangle Region of East Cen-

UNASSUMING AIR

Looking at Steve Barnett’s storefront, a patron could never predict the wealth of knowledge found inside the doors.

tral Mississippi, and home to Steve Barnett’s Fine Guns.

It would be safe to assume that finding a gun shop in Mississippi would be like falling off a log, especially in a town that brought us Mossy Oak camouflage and a great bounty of outdoor media, but I’m not looking for just any gun shop. So well-camouflaged is this place that I had to ask the proprietors of a neighboring women’s clothing shop for directions. They cast a classic expression my way that said, *Bless your heart*, before explaining that it’s just down the block, where it’s been all along, right between the drug store and the barber shop, across the street from City Hall. Of course, it is.

Standing in front of the store, there is no mistaking Steve Barnett’s Fine Guns. But for the single-pane storefront glass, one might feel the sensation of heading off on safari, with animals and birds of all varieties keeping watch on the door and the magic that lies beyond. Could they but speak, they would no doubt recall a great litany of names and faces, the known knowns and the unknown knowns of the upland and safari world who have made a pilgrimage to this humble storefront in pursuit of a Purdey, with a hankering for a Holland, to gaze wist-

And everywhere are guns, wall to wall and sea to shining sea. From the quiet streets of West Point, it’s like stepping into Hemingway’s den in a house that he built in Faulkner’s hometown.

fully upon a Westley, or rakishly upon a Rigby. Once inside, these pilgrims are rarely disappointed in a showroom that exudes both the artistic side of exquisite firearms and the swarthy hunters of a bygone era. There is framed art and oriental rugs, glass cases filled with the accoutrements of the Best Gun world, from snap caps to vintage reloading and gunsmithing tools. And everywhere are guns, wall to wall and sea to shining sea. From the quiet streets of West Point, it’s like stepping into Hemingway’s den in a house that he built in Faulkner’s hometown.

The store’s center aisle offers a variety of vistas, gentle portals

into the weeds of double guns of every gauge, caliber, and history. It’s like walking through the Louvre, only smaller and not nearly as crowded, where every gun is like a Mona Lisa. Though no longer open to the general public, Barnett greets customers by appointment. A few steps in, and you understand why this shopping experience may not be suited for everyone. One has to wonder how many steps the average hunter might take down that center aisle before glancing at the tags on the guns and correlating the asking price of the gun with the estimated value of his own home. For some, the number on the tag is aspirational.



For others, it's farcical. Barnett focuses his attention on the former, a strategy that has borne fruit for over two decades.

Despite his success in what is a thinly sliced niche in the firearms trade, though, Barnett didn't start out to be the chief gun runner to kings and captains. Born into the grocery business in Cumming, Georgia, about the time the landscape north of Atlanta was swelling to accommodate Lake Lanier, Steve showed promise as a golfer. He left college early to try his luck on the professional circuit but returned to the family grocery business when that luck ran out. His lifelong interest in guns, though, soon evolved into more than a hobby, and in the mid-'80s a side hustle was born. There were trade shows and gun shows, swap meets and estate sales, and the almost never-ending work took its toll, ending his first marriage. Most in the Barnett orbit thought he was crazy, that his obsession with guns was a distraction, a road to financial ruin. Some of those who are less familiar with what he actually does continue to harbor those thoughts, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, through the late '80s and early '90s, Barnett was learning the trade and building both an inventory and a reputation. By 1993, he was ready to open his first shop. This is where Faulkner and Thomas Sutpen sneak back into the story.

After the dissolution of his first marriage, Steve met Joan, largely because they were both single parents of young kids

around the same age. Early in their courtship, Joan decided to return to her native Mississippi, Steve decided to follow, and our story crossed state lines and time zones to begin anew in West Point. Initially recruited to establish his storefront in the newly developed Mossy Oak Mall, Steve soon discovered that his business benefitted less and less from general retail traffic. An opportunity emerged to buy a building and relocate downtown, and a deal was struck. It was then that Barnett began building, in earnest, what would become Hemingway's den. Like Faulkner's Sutpen, he built it from scratch, out of the ground, in defiance of the many who said it couldn't be done. In his defense, Barnett is relatively quiet and unassuming, despite my efforts to mythologize him.

To dispel some of the romance of that story, though, one would do well to remember the little innovation that came along in the mid-'90s. They called it the Internet, and Steve Barnett is quick to give credit where credit is due. "The Internet built this business," he offered in his classic, self-deprecating manner, recognizing that trade shows and gun shows, with a few exceptions, don't draw the people that typically pay \$50,000 for used shotguns. That same market awareness led Steve to close his store to the general public almost 20 years ago. Who buys these guns? "People who can," Steve affirmed, in a manner neither conceited nor condescending. And his



Steve Barnett has garnered his experience as a primary player through a tireless passion for ensuring that the finest guns in the world pass through his hands.

market is so razor thin, a firm grasp of who's buying and who's selling is essential. Otherwise a merchant can rapidly become a collector, which Barnett most assuredly is not. In his early years, he amassed a collection of 129 Winchester Model 70s, in every barrel and caliber combination, and liquidating that collection generated the working capital to start his business, providing a clean break between the motivations of collector and merchant. "I get to have the best guns in the world pass through my hands," he says, with added emphasis on the last part. And for him, that's enough.

Those who buy the guns that Steve is selling break out into three categories, at least as described by Larry Potterfield, who was standing by his son Russell, both clients who happened by the store. "There are hunters, shooters, and collectors," Potterfield said, with the quiet certainty of a career in a gun-and-ammunition business known as Midway, USA. "Hunters rarely shoot, shooters rarely hunt, and collectors rarely do either one." These distinctions are most striking for their efficiency in capturing both the breadth of the market and the very real silos of interest that divide it. The Potterfields prove an exception to many rules, it seems, since they collect fine guns that they also hunt and shoot with. Russell, who grew up in the family's gun business and cultivated a discerning eye for the art and engineering of Best Guns, describes the thrill of the chase that often punctuates a period of fascination with a particular gun. "Collecting is like filling in a bingo card," he said. "Connecting the elements you study with the actual artifacts of craftsmanship and history manifest in each gun on your list."

Most buyers, it seems, bring quite a bit of time and passion into their purchases before they invest the first dime, and one of Steve Barnett's strengths is his almost encyclopedic knowledge of fine guns. He speaks the language and shares the passion, and his store is the very definition of destination retail. Those who make the pilgrimage see him as something of an investment advisor, largely because his knowledge of the fine gun market is said to be unmatched, aided in part by the Internet's making that market more efficient and his many years in the trade. Steve is quick to say that he "loves the buying and the selling," the movement and the chase. But he has also built a reputation for good faith valuation and negotiation, another effort supported by the Internet. The essence of his advice to all who ask would be to "find the best gun you can afford to buy and buy the one that's in the best condition." Such a perspective might seem like common sense, but it's informed by real-time price variations due to brand, grade, wear, condition, and the many other factors that determine value. That's before you consider larger market conditions like supply and demand.

His clients also make the pilgrimage because his knowledge

VESTIGES OF FINE GUNS

Steve Barnett prides himself in collecting and selling the artifacts that tell the story of the fine-gun industry.





of fine guns is matched by his awareness of their whereabouts. Robert Taylor, a longtime friend and customer of Barnett's, often looks for guns to be used in fundraisers, especially the annual Governor's Hunt in support of the Foundation for Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks. Even with special, hard-to-find guns, he said, "Steve will tell me that if he doesn't have one in the store, he can have it in two days." He is firmly entrenched in the flow of fine guns around the country, if not the world, though the same might not always be said of his own store. Despite his uncanny knack for walking straight to a particular gun, a veritable needle in a haystack, Barnett sometimes stumbles on other treasures he'd long forgotten he had. No gun is ever lost, though, and no gun, once it passes through his hands, is ever forgotten.

While there are no lost guns, Steve Barnett has cultivated a sort of Never Never Land for the lost boys of the fine gun world, the men and women who look at the rows of Purdeys and Hollands and Westleys with the same reverent gleam that they might've cast upon their very first gun. There is a suspension of both reality and disbelief wherein Barnett's clients aren't allowed to wrestle with the possibility that the shotgun they're holding might cost more than their house. At least their first house. Like a kid in a candy store, they want it because they want it, and they buy it because they can. The craftsmanship sweeps over them like fairy dust, and the magic is contagious. Even those with very

real mortgage payments relish the connection between a buyer and one of Barnett's guns, in part because the story of that gun continues. It may have entered the shop through an estate sale or a collector's liquidity event, but that gorgeous piece of wood and finely engraved steel is leaving wrapped in the grin of a new steward, one who appreciates the artistry as well as the history, and one who can't wait to tell the story.

Steve Barnett has built a business out of those stories, told and retold on the buy side as well as the sell side for over three decades. His is perhaps the largest secondary market for fine guns in the world, and his competitors are few and far behind. Like Faulkner's character, Barnett has built a very successful venture from the Mississippi ground up with his own hands, despite—or, perhaps, in large part because of—overwhelming odds and persistent expectations that he would fail. If there's a fine gun anywhere in your future, or if you're just curious what Hemingway's den might've looked like in Never Never Land, make the pilgrimage to West Point, Mississippi. Call first, though. 🐾

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

More impressive than Steve Barnett's assemblage of fine guns is the knowledge of the firearms industry that he provides to his customers and collectors.

"Every issue is entertaining, informative, and thought provoking. I encourage any upland enthusiast and conservationist to give it a read. It hits all the marks: hunting, gear, wine, whisky(ey), cigars, food, travel, wildlife, and on and on. I love this magazine." —ALDEN S., *COVEY RISE* READER



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