Blasts from the past

Denham Springs craftsman recreating antique cannons

BY GEORGE MORRIS

Inside a plain, clutter block building in Denham Springs, amidst the clutter of steel and wood, blocks of wood and metal shavings, Rod Pyatt is making history.

Pyatt has his business, a Batson Rouge Arsenal. He makes Revolutionary and Civil War reenactment cannons. His cannon is not a toy. It is a fully operational weapon. If Pyatt wishes, he could launch an attack on most of his Denham Springs neighbors.

Fortunately for those driving down Florida Avenue, Pyatt is not so inclined. Almost all of his cannons go to war reenactment groups, museums and battlefield parks across the United States and in several foreign countries. In a little over a year, Pyatt has shipped 13 cannons to as far as Australia.

Pyatt is a retired sportscaster from New York City. He says, "I was a baseball player in Virginia right in the middle of the old battlefield, and I wanted a Confederate—relics—friend, and he bought it for his wife for Christmas, and she loved it. She was ecstatic."

Individual buyers are rare, but it was Pyatt’s own interest in owning such a cannon that led him to start this business. Three years ago, Pyatt was a mechanical engineer for a Lake Charles construction firm. A co-worker asked Pyatt to attend a Civil War reenactment. Pyatt did, and he fell in love with the re-enactments and the weaponry used.

Pyatt wanted to buy a cannon, but discovered the replica cost more than $10,000. "When I found out how expensive these things were and how basically simple the design was," he said, "I wanted to build some of these things a lot cheaper than that. They said, 'Oh, no, no, you can't do that.'"

"I did some research and in the engineering profession, I had access to the types of materials that I needed. I knew what I could contact, I did the research and I developed the manufacturing method I used."

When I finished my gun, all these skeptics that said I couldn’t do it, all the skeptics were wrong, and I was far from perfect—and they said, 'How much would you charge to make one? I got to thinking it sure would be fun to do as a side project.'

A little over a year ago, Pyatt was laid off from his job at Ethyl, and all the employment offers were from out of state. He decided to move his business.

Pyatt’s move to Denham Springs was seen as an opportunity to start his business.

A steel cylinder awaits the work that will make it into a cannon barrel.

ABOVE: Pyatt paints the finishing touches on a cannon wheel.

LEFT: To be accurate replicas of the original equipment, virtually all of the chains, straps—even the bolts— have to be made.
Cannons

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start Baton Rouge Arsenal instead.
Instead of using bronze or cast iron, the metals used in the original guns, Pyatt uses high-strength carbon steel for the cannon barrel. For muzzle-loading cannons, he takes a solid steel cylinder and has the barrel bored to the appropriate diameter and depth. That way, there is no breach to plug. Then, he shapes the exterior on a lathe.

Most replica manufacturers, Pyatt said, take a metal tube and weld a plug in the back end. His method is stronger. Pyatt said:

"I'm the only one in the world that makes antique artillery expressly out of steel, and I'm the only manufacturer that doesn't require a liability waiver on my pieces because you're not going to rupture these things," Pyatt said. "The safety factor is enormous."

"These guns are totally functional, and I dare say if the South would have had these guns, it would have been a different story, because they could have doubled their charge safety."

Except for wheels, which he buys from an Amish wheelwright in Ohio, Pyatt also makes the gun carriage. It is a similarly meticulous process. Pyatt uses specifications printed in an 1840s book. Since drafting techniques have changed in the past 150 years, Pyatt admits he has to guess at some of book's instructions and alter the finished product if it doesn't fit together properly.

Pyatt makes the carriages out of cypress, which the Army of the times considered an acceptable substitute for the more common white oak. For the many plates, rings, straps and other carriage accessories, Pyatt forms them in his shop. He even makes most of the bolts that go on the carriage.

"They don't make things like this anymore," Pyatt said. "A lot of this stuff looks like you just slip it on there. No... I tell people when they call and ask, 'Are these to spec?' I say, 'Within a 16th of an inch.' The foundries couldn't do that. Each foundry did something a little different."

Since Pyatt makes guns to order, he has several completely different guns in progress at any given time. On one recent weekday, an 1851 No. 2 Napoleon cannon was about to be shipped to Indiana. Cost: about $10,200. Its carriage alone was 114 1/2 inches long and weighed 1,100 pounds. The wheels were 57 inches high and 64 1/2 inches apart.

Near the front entrance was a smaller, 1861 Ward cannon with its trademark tapered barrel. On the floor was the steel that would become a Whitworth, the only breech-loading cannon used extensively in the Civil War.

Learning to make these cannons has taught Pyatt a lot about 18th and 19th century warfare and the combatants.

"The good cannoniers knew everything about their gun," Pyatt said. "They cared for it. They knew how to aim it. They knew how to fire it. They knew how to pull it. They knew how to baby it. They talked to it. They knew everything about it."

"They knew its soul. They were its soul. They were magnificent men. Cannonersing is a real science."

Even in today's re-enactments, with no live ammunition being used, it remains a dangerous science. Loading and firing a muzzle-loading cannon is a nine-step process, and shortcuts are dangerous. Before reloading the cannon, the barrel must be swabbed with a wet sponge or cloth to kill burning embers. Otherwise, the next explosive charge can ignite prematurely.

"It's dangerous at some of the horror stories you hear about the neglect of safety procedures, ignorance, carelessness," Pyatt said.

It is a completely different reaction, though, when Pyatt sees one of his guns in action. At the 100th anniversary commemoration of the Red River Campaign in Mansfield, Pyatt delivered two mortar barrels to a re-enactor. Three men and a girl dressed as Confederates were walking by speaking in a foreign language.

"As they passed by, one stopped and grabbed the other one and said, 'Baton Rouge Arsenal!'" Pyatt said. "It's like, 'There it is! We've seen their ads! They were from the Netherlands. I stuck my chest out a little.'"

For Pyatt, pride is part of the paycheck. Although Pyatt has several people who perform part-time tasks, Baton Rouge Arsenal is essentially a one-man operation. That limits the number of cannons - and money - he can make. But the rewards, he said, are worth it.

"This is fabulous. Fabulous," Pyatt said. "I love them. I love building them. When you go out to a re-enactment and you see one of your guns out there, you talk about a sense of pride... The sense of achievement is indescribable."