

# Ithaca Gun Once an Area Staple

Gene Endres, Correspondent 4:58 p.m. EDT September 22, 2016

**The Smith and Baker families began manufacturing firearms, first in Lisle, then in other places in Central New York**



(Photo: Provided Photos)

Ithacans still see the remains of the Ithaca Gun Company's factory on East Hill near Ithaca Falls, especially the tall factory smokestack. But aside from those industrial relics, Ithaca Gun has mostly receded into history, except for its ongoing reputation with gun owners and buyers.

Ithaca Gun was always a family business. Lewis Steven Smith was a tanner in Center Lisle whose business failed when he made an incorrect estimate on delivering tanned hides. He then started a general store and soon connected with William H. Baker, a Center Lisle native. Baker had designed and patented several improvements to the working of guns, and he and Lewis Smith began manufacturing them in 1863, first in nearby Marathon, and then in Lisle.

Leroy Smith, son of Lewis, worked in the business, as did his younger brother, Lyman. By 1877, Lewis and Leroy took the business to Syracuse working with Lyman, producing "Baker's

Patented Double Breech-Loading Gun.” The business moved again to Manlius Station, outside of Syracuse, and in 1883, Baker and Leroy came to Ithaca, where they acquired Water Power Lot #6 on Fall Creek, intending to make guns there. This location had originally been the “Hub and Spoke” company, manufacturing agricultural implements.

Fall Creek had long been a manufacturing site in Ithaca. Thanks to Ezra Cornell’s 1832 tunnel and dam, there was a constant source of water power. The rushing creek plunged through the tunnel, and could be diverted through smaller dams on the flume to power turbines that turned wheels, belts and shafts for mechanical power.

William Baker, along with Ithacans John Van Natta and Dwight McIntyre, bought the water power rights on the creek. They began making the “Ithaca Baker” shotgun in 1883, in a building next to the flume. By 1886, Leroy Smith and his brother-in-law, George Livermore, bought out the Baker interests and set up the Ithaca Gun Company. Leroy was himself involved in the design of guns and patented four “hammerless” shotguns in 1887-1889.

Leroy’s son Louis (“Lou”) came into the company as a teenager, and Lou’s son Charles, an aviator and pilot with American Airlines, came into the company after retiring as a flier. George Livermore (“Uncle George”) was offered 50 percent of the company by Leroy, and he and the Smiths alternated in the executive positions. George’s son, Paul, also joined the company after graduating from Cornell Law School. “Uncle George” stayed with Ithaca Gun as Chairman of the Board until his death in 1950 at age 104. Paul died in 1952 at 78, and, in his will, gave the family’s large house on Aurora Street to the community. It is now home to the United Way of Tompkins County.

By the late 1960s, with younger members of the Smith and Livermore families uninterested in managing Ithaca Gun, the company was put up for sale. A holding company bought the plant and its designs, becoming part of a diversified entity called General Recreation, Incorporated. While manufacturing continued and Ithaca Guns garnered broad respect in the industry, General Recreation fell into bankruptcy in 1978 and the plant closed, putting more than 100 workers out of a job. The company was reorganized by local investors and the plant re-opened in 1979, but bankruptcy loomed again in 1986, with a court ordering a forced sale and 100 workers were furloughed.

There are continuing financial adventures under the name of Ithaca Gun, but the actual manufacturing has been out of the county since 1986. While in Ithaca, Ithaca Gun had a reputation for high quality and often artistically decorated guns. Skilled workers produced technically superior shotguns, and artisans made exquisite engravings on the metal parts and elaborately carved wooden gunstocks. These are considered true collectors’ items.

In its day, Ithaca Gun was sold and advertised widely. In early celebrity endorsements, it was touted by Annie Oakley, of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and John Philip Sousa, America’s March King. After the final bankruptcy in 1986, the buildings on the shoulder of Fall Creek lay empty. Part of the property was sold for development as apartments, but the main factory buildings were found to be contaminated with lead from the manufacturing operations. The entire location became a Superfund site, and is still a continuing cleanup area. Only the tall stack

remains to remind Ithacans of what was once here that spread the name of Ithaca throughout the world.

*Gene Endres is a research assistant at The History Center in Tompkins County and a member of the Cornell Railroad Historical Society. The History Center is opening a new exhibit highlighting the Ithaca Gun Company as well as many other examples of Tompkins County's rich industrial history. Made in Tompkins County — a Timeline of Local Enterprise will open First Friday Gallery Night, Oct. 7 at 5 p.m., and will run until Feb. 18, 2017.*