

DAMASCUS BARRELS

Rumors & Facts

— LARRY'S SHORT STORIES #183 —

A man doesn't have many chances to help establish facts that can possibly destroy long-held rumors; but I've had one such chance. The opportunity came when reading the Winter 1999 issue of *The Double Gun Journal*.

Sherman Bell's article detailed a test he conducted, with the support of noted ballistics engineer Tom Armbruster, to determine the pressure necessary to burst the Damascus barrels of a 12 gauge Parker GH shotgun — by slowly increasing the powder charge, and measuring the pressure when fired. The Damascus barrels did indeed burst, at about three times the pressure generated by a factory 12 gauge shell. This was quite contrary to conventional wisdom.

Growing up, Dad had an old 12 gauge hammer gun, with twist steel barrels; that was his only shotgun. Apparently, I was a lot smarter than Dad, as I could

read the inside flaps on a box of shotgun shells. They all had essentially the same message — don't use modern shells in guns with Damascus or twist steel barrels. Reading the magazines of the time, there was often a letter from a reader asking about this and the answer was always the same — modern, smokeless powder shells will blow-up the barrels on Damascus shotguns. Interestingly, there was never a picture.

From a friend I got Sherman's phone number and gave him a call. Would he be willing to perform another test, on a larger lot of guns, shooting factory proof loads to establish



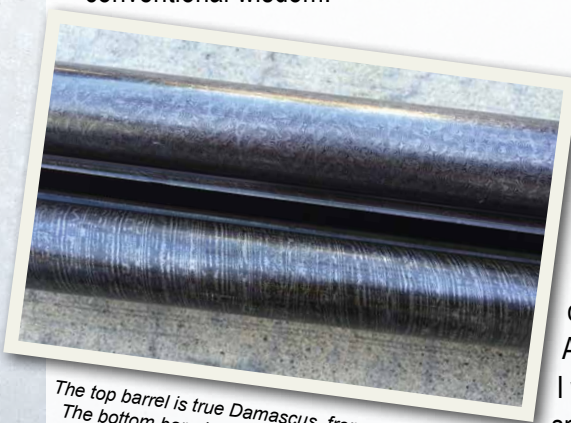
Remington 1900 12 gauge side-by-side with Damascus barrels. This gun was intentionally destroyed with a gross overcharge of smokeless powder. Such a charge would have destroyed any modern shotgun.

definitively the relative strength of Damascus barreled shotguns? He was agreeable to conducting the tests, but asked where we would get all the old shotguns and proof loads. Of course, I could come up with both; which was the reason for the call.

We sent the guns to Sherman, actually several different lots of them, along with the proof loads. Sherman methodically conducted the tests, firing

a great many proof loads through each of a wide variety of old Damascus and twist steel barreled shotguns. I won't go into the results here; they're published in *The Double Gun Journal* from 2006 through 2009. It's important to note that neither Sherman nor I claim that old Damascus barreled shotguns are safe to shoot; only a competent gunsmith should offer that opinion on an individual gun. What we do believe we've proved is that the long-held industry belief that all Damascus barreled shotguns are unsafe to shoot was just a rumor.

"...contrary to conventional wisdom."



The top barrel is true Damascus, from a Purdey 10 gauge. The bottom barrel is twist steel, from an Ithaca 12 gauge.

Larry Potterfield
Columbia, MO
Circa 2003

USA
Midway



Every shotgun shell box I've ever opened has had a warning similar to this one.