

# Rifles

By Ron Spomer

I do not know what Scotsmen wear under their kilts – nor does my curiosity extend far enough to compel additional research. But I have uncovered what Scotsmen were doing with firearms back in the 1870s. They were designing one of the most iconic single-shot rifles of all time – the Farquharson. And that classic single-shot design may have reached its zenith with today's stunning Soroka M07.

Kilt or no kilt, Scot John Farquharson designed and patented his famous falling-block action way back in 1872, just seven years after his countryman, Alexander Henry, had patented his own falling-block sidelock with its curious left-side, external hammer (to facilitate easier loading by right-handed shooters.)

Henry's rifle, widely used in competition at the time, was itself an evolution of American Christian Sharps' 1848 dropping block, which initially fired paper-wrapped cartridges. Although metallic rimfire cartridges were used sparingly in the Civil War, more powerful center-primed, self-contained metallic cartridges weren't commercially viable until about 1868 when Union Metallic Cartridge Company (UMC, now Remington) began selling them.

Each of these developments

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inevitably led to the stunning Farquharson. With its self-cocking internal springs and hammer, it

shows no superfluous lines, no wasted parts, no jarring accouterments. Simple. Elegant. Balanced. It has justifiably been called the highest form of the British single-shot rifle maker's art. Yet John Farquharson never built one. He left that chore to George Gibbs of Bristol, England.

Surprisingly, the Gibbs' firm manufactured just 974 Farquharson rifles through 1910. This seems odd since this was the era of the great African hunters and commercial ivory trade. No less famous a hunter than Frederick Courtney Selous doted on Farquharsons, praising them in *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*, one of the most widely read and influential African books of its time. Few Gibbs-Farquharson originals survive, and this paucity inspires both imitators and innovators.

Whether we know it or not, most of us recognize the classic stalking rifle profile and function of the Farquharson from the daring Ruger #1, perhaps the famously accurate Miller or the trim, elegant Dakota Model 10. Each of these rifles was inspired by the Farquharson archetype. And now, the new Soroka Model 07 is poised to not just join them, but set a new standard in falling block excellence.

Just as Americans don't expect classic rifle designs to have emerged from Scotland, neither do we imagine modern upgrades to sneak out of New Zealand. Yet the Soroka does. And why not? The chamois, tahr and red stags of this dramatically mountainous island are the perfect proving ground for a handy, precision stalking rifle. Some 20 years ago Kiwi native Glenn Soroka began hunting New Zealand's Southern Alps with a rebarreled Ruger #1 and fell in love with the falling-block design. He switched to a more elegant Dakota M10 for a time, then determined to improve on both.

Soroka had no training as a gunmaker or engineer when he sat down to design his 07, which makes his accomplishment in the M07 all the more remarkable. Soroka "wanted to negate the mechanical issues" of the early Dakotas, which often broke firing pins when dry fired (since corrected with a redesign.)

"And with the Ruger I wanted to improve the esthetics," Soroka explained in his quick Kiwi accent. "Both are great rifles, but I wanted to try my hand at what I thought the perfect Farquharson should be. I wanted a straight, one-piece firing pin driven by a big, quick coil spring for fast lock time. And I wanted it to look perfect."

It does. If my sense of esthetics can be trusted, the Model 07 is, if not the most beautiful falling block of all time, certainly one of the top three. And if form follows function, the M07 is nigh perfect, because the unfinished sample I test-fired grouped .300 Winchester magnum factory loads well under MOA. One sample clustered under .500-inch. That's phenomenal accuracy from any rifle, let alone a brand new, unfinished, untested single-shot sporting a never-fired barrel.

Soroka spent three months scribbling and drawing, three months studying mechanics and levers and basic engineering principles of the falling block rifle – and then he began modeling, hand-building, improving and perfecting. Five years later, at the SCI convention in Reno, he handed me his personal M07 in .300 Winchester Magnum, still under construction.

"It's not quite finished," Soroka said. "I need to clean it up a bit and finish polishing the barrel, reset that lever there. Never mind these screw heads. They're just temporary. I'll clean those up but – well, here, take a look at this blued model. I like stainless barrels on my rifle, but we make traditional blued ones too."

My head was spinning as I tried to absorb the beauty of the color case-hardened receivers and under-levers on two different 07s on the rack while deciphering Mr. Soroka's rapid-fire accent.

"Tyke it 'ome if you'd loik and shoot it. We can aroinge to peeck it up lie-der."

Not surprisingly, I took Soroka's personal, unfinished rifle home.

I mounted a Schmidt & Bender 2.5-10x40 Summit scope in Talley rings atop the solid quarter rib of the 8.5-pound M07. At Black's Creek Gun Range near Boise, the rifle directed three Barnes VorTex 180-grain TTSX factory loads into .426-inch at 100 yards. A Black Hills load of 178-grain Hornady A-Max went into .695-inch and Winchester's Supreme 180-grain Accubonds punched

a 1.3-inch cluster. These were the first loads ever fired through the rifle, which sports a fairly heavy (.685 inch at muzzle) Lothar-Walther six-groove barrel 26 inches long. The trigger breaks consistently like you-know-what at 2¾ pounds with no creep. Those impressive groups were no accident.

The 07's massive breechblock slides smoothly straight up and down in the mortised action bay. Cases can be extracted or ejected, depending on how hard the under-lever is activated. A quick thrust threw hot empties well over my shoulder. A gentle drop allowed me to pick cases off the grooved top of the block.

Part of the reason the rifle is so accurate must be the manner in which the forend wood is attached. Instead of hanging from an action bar protruding from the action ala Ruger, it merely screws to a truncheon block on the barrel ala Dakota. By minimizing contact between the forward action face and rear forend wood, pressure shifts are reduced if not eliminated.

In hand, the rifle feels lighter than scales indicate, thanks to that classic,

slim Farquharson-style forend, an open grip and a perfect balance between the hands. The rifle comes up quickly, aligns easily and hangs on target nicely without feeling front-heavy. The consistent, precise, nicely pointed 24 LPI checkering in a multi-point, wrap-around English pattern with mullard borders provides a secure grip on the to-die-for Exhibition-Special Selection Turkish walnut. Recoil is tamed nicely via the straight comb, shadow-line cheekpiece and Pachmyr Old English Decelerator pad. An ebony forend tip echoes the black butt spacer and a black barrel band provides an attachment point on the barrel for a sling. The butt sling stud is the classic, inletted, two-screw type. The grip cap is steel.

The stunning stock was inletted and checkered by some of America's best craftsmen, members of the American Custom Gunmakers Guild. Wood-to-metal fit was slightly proud, as it should be on a fine piece like this. The checkered tang safety, which blocks both the cocking sear and trigger, proved a bit sticky, and the stainless barrel showed light sanding marks. But let's remember, this was an unfired, unfinished rifle. Soroka assured me any and all such glitches will be cleaned up and perfected on production rifles. These are bespoke rifles tailored to each buyer with prices starting at \$14,500. Upgrades include checkered steel or skeleton buttplate, skeleton grip cap, upgraded wood and engraving.

Soroka is offering two basic models: The Alpine Express, in standard or magnum chamberings at around 7 pounds and 8 pounds respectively, and the African Express in .375 H&H and upward at around 8 pounds. Actions can be ordered in rust blue, hot blue, French gray or color hardened. Barrels can be rust blue, hot blue or satin black chrome.

Glenn Soroka's Model 07 falling-block single-shot may not be the last ever designed on the Farquharson model, but it could become the best. That is certainly the New Zealander's intention, and, if this unfinished sample is any indication, he's on the cusp of succeeding. 🐾