

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 273

By Swann

A RESOLUTION to recognize the Tennessee Rifle as the historic rifle of the State of Tennessee.

WHEREAS, it is fitting that the members of this General Assembly should recognize the historical significance of an acknowledged Tennessee original, the Tennessee Rifle, which originated in East Tennessee and dates back to the time of Statehood; and

WHEREAS, the Tennessee Rifle is a muzzle-loading rifle that was widely used by hunters, trappers, traders, and explorers in the early to mid-nineteenth century; its popularity continued into the twentieth century for use in shooting matches; and

WHEREAS, a special style of long rifle, generally small in caliber with a very long barrel, the Tennessee Rifle was recognizable because of its slender form and hand-forged iron hardware; the silhouette line of its stock was usually straight with a gently curved wrist; and

WHEREAS, one of the signature characteristics of the rifle was its simple iron butt plate and trigger guard, with the only adornment being a simple cigar-shaped patch box; and

WHEREAS, well-suited to the mountainous terrain of its East Tennessee origins, the unassuming style of the Tennessee Rifle saw little variation throughout the frontier era; and

WHEREAS, the rifles were a necessary tool in the early settlement days along with the axe and plow; in addition to the need to harvest meat for the table and repel bears and wolves, settlers faced ever-present threats from various hostilities; and

WHEREAS, many owners of Tennessee Rifles took great pride in their rifle's ability to shoot straight, and some even named their rifles; most of the period stories including the rifles extol the prowess of its users in shooting matches or bear hunting, with the greatest among them achieving near-celebrity status in the frontier era; and

WHEREAS, unlike the military musket, which had an effective accurate range of perhaps fifty yards, the Tennessee Rifle was easily accurate to a distance of 150 to 200 yards; the rifle's superiority was due to spiral grooves cut into the bore of the barrel that worked in combination with a tightly patched round ball that, when fired, caused the wrapped ball to spin and remain on a straight trajectory to its target; and

WHEREAS, the Tennessee Rifle, essentially an American synthesis of components, was unquestionably the most efficient firearm available during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century; and

WHEREAS, in Tennessee, gunsmiths arrived with the settlers; as a matter of record, the first permanent settler in 1769 of what is now Tennessee was William Bean, Sr., (1721-1782), a Virginia-trained gunsmith; and

WHEREAS, it is likely that many future Tennesseans who fought at King's Mountain during the Revolutionary War were carrying rifles built on the frontier; and

WHEREAS, in the settlement period, shooting matches were held after barn raisings and on court days; the matches, in which riflemen showcased their sharpshooting skills, became a long-standing tradition during the nineteenth century and functioned as a social gathering complete with promoters, advertising campaigns, and grand prizes such as entire steers, pigs, or turkeys; and

WHEREAS, these shooting matches continued on into the twentieth century in East Tennessee; World War I hero Alvin C. York of Pall Mall took part in many of these "Over the Log" shooting matches; to this day, the annual Alvin York Memorial Shoot is still being held each spring in Pall Mall; and

WHEREAS, the historic Tennessee Rifle has never stopped being built and used since its earliest development, even though it was replaced by the cartridge rifle and the double-barreled breech-loading shotgun in general daily use; Charley Bean, Jr., a descendent of the

State's original settler and gunsmith, and Wiley Gibson, part of a third-generation gunsmithing family from Sevier County, were still building rifles well into the twentieth century; and

WHEREAS, recognized by collectors for its unique regional style and hand-forged iron workmanship, the Tennessee Rifle has grown in popularity over the years, and descendants of our State's pioneering families continue to cherish the old rifles as family heirlooms; and

WHEREAS, as an important part of this State's rich history and heritage, the Tennessee Rifle should be appropriately recognized; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we recognize the Tennessee Rifle as the historic rifle of the State of Tennessee and encourage all Tennesseans to learn more about this essential frontier tool.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy and upon proper request made to the appropriate clerk, the language appearing immediately following the State seal appear without House or Senate designation.