

# THE RETURN OF AN OUTFITTER

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Griffin & Howe's future in history

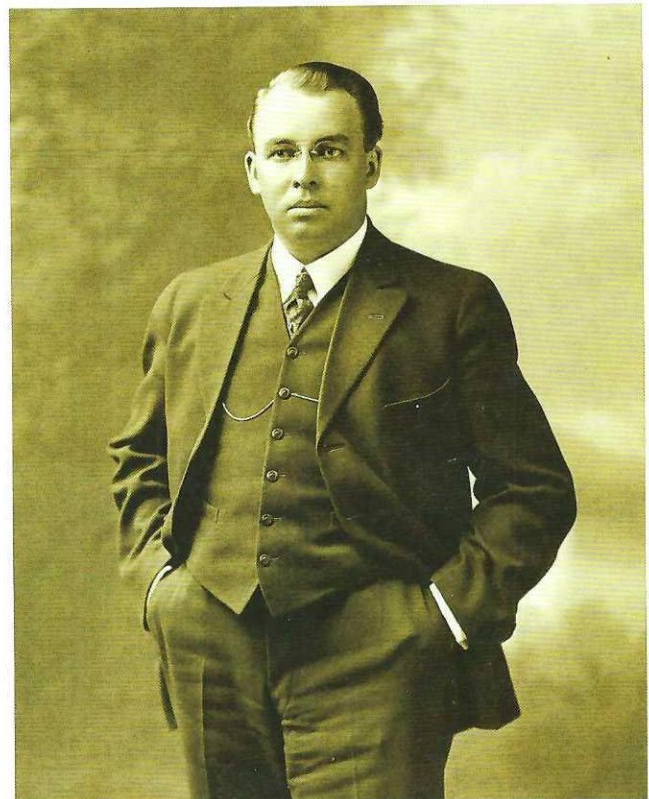
STORY BY OLIVER HARTNER





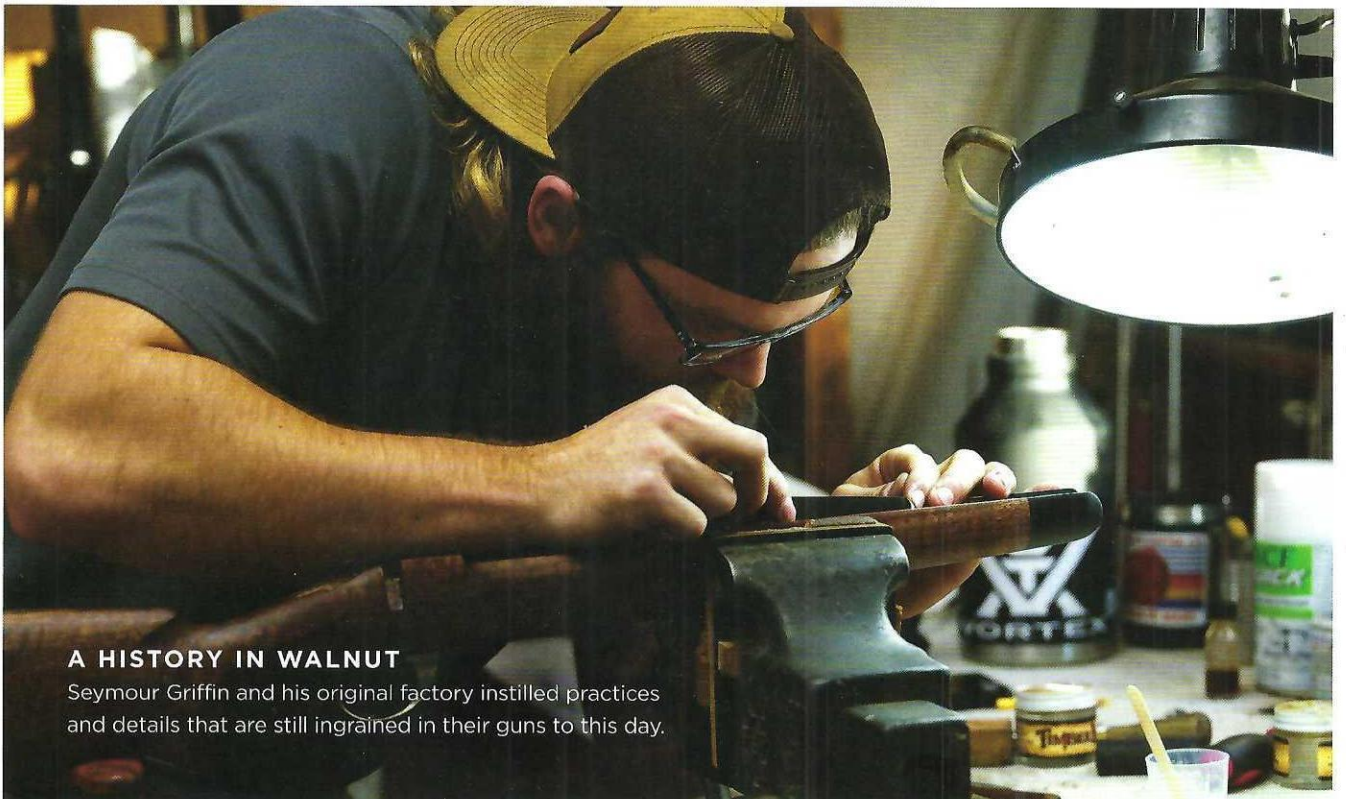
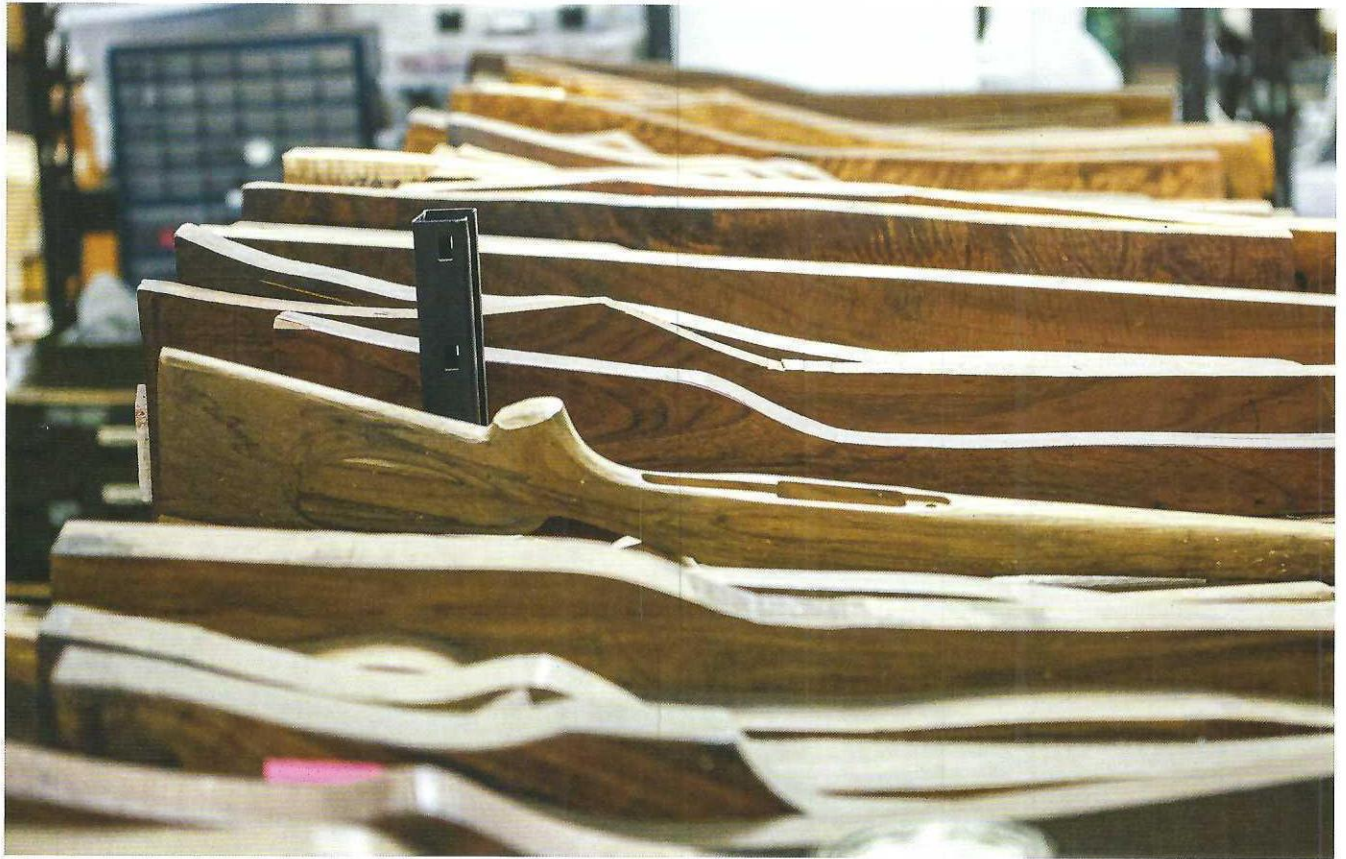
Living long enough to see a centennial, whether in reference to a human life span or that of a business, requires a combination of good fortune and wise decisions. But people reaching 100 years of age have achieved or will soon discover the limits of their longevity, whereas a successful business could still have a future. As Griffin & Howe celebrated its centennial this year, the course they charted has the potential to expand their business—and a broader enthusiasm for sporting life—into the next century.

Griffin & Howe owes its existence in part to President Theodore Roosevelt, who inspired a generation of Americans with his book *African Game Trails*, an accounting of his safari, published in 1910. In its pages, he celebrated the versatility and lethality of his .30-06 Springfield rifle but lamented its lack of a sporting stock. A cabinet maker in New York City named Seymour Griffin agreed with Roosevelt's assessment. He dismantled his own Springfield rifle and fashioned a replacement stock from a blank of French walnut, applying the precision woodworking skills of cabinetry to his new passion. Demand for Griffin's work grew over the next 13 years until he could no longer sustain the cabinetry business alongside making custom gunstocks. Colonel Townsend Whelen, one of the era's foremost experts on sporting riflery, suggested to Griffin that his business would be better positioned to meet the demand for



COURTESY OF GRIFFIN & HOWE





**A HISTORY IN WALNUT**

Seymour Griffin and his original factory instilled practices and details that are still ingrained in their guns to this day.







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sporting rifles by adding an accomplished machinist within the gun trade. Griffin added James V. Howe, shop foreman of Frankford Arsenal in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to his team before also adding James M. Holsworth and James L. Gerry alongside Howe and Whelen. The five of them launched Griffin & Howe in May of 1923 and until 1925, built their celebrated rifles within the limited space of a New York City loft.

They introduced several innovations to the rifle industry within those first couple years, such as the .35 Whelen cartridge and the still-ubiquitous side- and top-mounts for optics, allowing a shooter to detach a rifle scope without losing its zero. The former outfitter and purveyor of fine sporting-life appurtenances, Abercrombie & Fitch, acquired Griffin & Howe in 1930, and they supplied the custom rifles sold by their parent company to its elite clients—clients such as Robert Ruark, Ernest Hemingway, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. World War II interrupted operations for a brief time as they shifted priorities to aid the war effort, making trigger assemblies for anti-aircraft guns along with sidemounts for infantry rifles. They resumed building custom rifles after the war, and in December of 1976, Abercrombie & Fitch sold the business to longtime employee, Bill Ward. Griffin & Howe relocated its headquarters from East 44th Street in New York City to Bernardsville, New Jersey, in 1987. Its shooting academy and showroom at Hudson Farm in Hopatcong, New Jersey, opened in 1997, followed two years later by a satellite showroom in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Since its inception, Griffin & Howe has maintained its capacity to build some of the world's finest rifles, and it has represented other legendary gun firms from around the globe as a service to its clients. It has also been a purveyor of the finest sporting-life clothing and equipment, offering its clients only the best brands at the pinnacle of their craft. But in the years leading up to its 100th anniversary, leadership at Griffin & Howe felt the winds of change and knew they needed to harness them. Their market research showed that new customers and longtime clients wanted a

nostalgic experience; something they couldn't find anywhere else in the marketplace. It also revealed an expressed desire for classically authentic sporting-life experiences among a younger generation of consumers.

It was eventually decided that Griffin & Howe's past would inform its future. Steve Polanish, CEO of Griffin & Howe, explained, "My goal has been to position Griffin & Howe as a premier all-inclusive outfitter, taking it back to the role once held by its original parent company, Abercrombie & Fitch. We are the only firearms company in the world that operates manufacturing, repairs, shooting grounds, retail, fine dining, and eventually, overnight accommodations all at one location." Mike Murphy, Griffin & Howe's COO, added, "We've seen nothing but growth among the millennial age demographic for several years. They want these experiences and services, and we're here to set them up for success in whatever it is they choose to do."

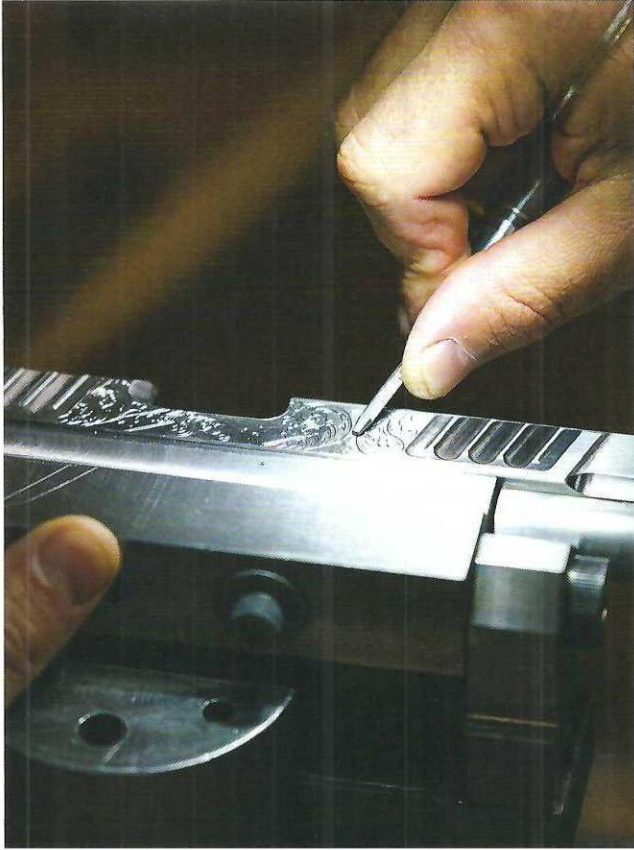
Griffin & Howe consolidated its operations to its shooting grounds at Hudson Farm for beginning the next chapter. A newly constructed 24,000-square-foot showroom features guns and accoutrements from several brands synonymous with excelsior quality. The facility's expanded gun room showcases Griffin & Howe's traditional lineup of fine guns in addition to newer gunmakers. It also operates as the retail hub and provides other client services for booking trips and scheduling lessons for a wide variety of sporting-life pursuits. A conference room and dining hall for private events and corporate retreats is also available at the facility. Julian & Sons—one of the world's foremost builders of gun rooms and trophy rooms—executed the bulk of the finish work for the entire building. They used beautifully figured American black walnut with a deep rich stain throughout its interior, punctuating Griffin & Howe's desire for both an aesthetic and ethos of timeless elegance. Joe Julian of Julian & Sons said, "We were very enthusiastic when Steve Polanish and Guy Bignell approached us about this project. It's truly been an honor to be a part of this new era for Griffin & Howe."

The shooting grounds feature a 9,000-square-foot event center with retractable wall space for hosting open-air sporting-life events such as shooting tournaments and gatherings for conservation groups. A 20-station sporting clays course and a simulated driven-hunt station, along with trap, skeet, five-stand, and helice fields, allow shotgunners to sharpen

## A NEW HOME, AN OLD FAVORITE

A spacious new facility with extraordinary cabinetry and finishes frames the history of Griffin & Howe beautifully.





their skills. It also hosts four handgun ranges, a 980-yard rifle range, a 15-station 3D archery range, and fly-fishing clinics run by Thomas & Thomas, accommodating a comprehensive array of sporting-life interests. “I have 38 sporting clays tournaments already booked this year for fundraising events, and demand has been growing at an exponential pace since Covid. People wanted to be outside again, and we haven’t seen any signs of that slowing down,” Polanish said. In celebration of its 100th anniversary this past June, Griffin & Howe hosted a three-day event at Hudson Farm featuring over 80 vendors along with clinics for shooting, fly-fishing, archery, dog training, and conservation education.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic facets of the new expansion includes an enhanced production capacity for the company’s legendary rifle, along with a new partnership for growing the gunsmithing trade. Dan Rossiter, shop foreman of Griffin & Howe and secretary of the American Custom Gunmakers Guild (ACGG) and the AC GG Foundation, said, “We’re trying to fill a void in the American market for fine gunmaking with younger talent. We intend to train *gunsmiths* as opposed to *armorers* and would like to eventually offer an apprenticeship program to provide a true education in gunsmithing.” The AC GG formed a 501(c)3 foundation prior to Griffin & Howe’s 100th anniversary event, and proceeds raised from the shooting tournament benefited the foundation. “Aside from establishing a robust curriculum, we want to offer scholarships to qualified students with an interest in our program.” Top students of the program will be considered for employment by Griffin & Howe upon completion of their education. Given the dire need for talented and apprenticed gunsmiths—both domestically and to a greater extent across the globe—the timing could not be more imperative.

Griffin & Howe’s latest iteration reminds us to never underestimate the power of nostalgia. The company has doubled down on its commitment to provide exceptional goods and services to its clients, but it has also invested in a broader vision both for themselves and for sporting life at large. Brick-and-mortar businesses still standing after the onslaught of online sales offered a timeless and elegant retail experience, and this experience was accepted as part of the purchase price when the cashier rang up the bill. At Griffin & Howe, the same holds true, but investing time and money with them also marks the beginning of a relationship, a point of demarcation from which a new customer then becomes a valued client. At Hudson Farm, the purchase of a gun, a fly rod, or a bow, is just the beginning, followed by access to another world where sporting-life aspirations become reality. 🦋

#### IT’S IN THE DETAILS

Every shotgun and rifle receives the same attention, the same purpose-driven focus on each detail in pursuit of perfection for each client.



