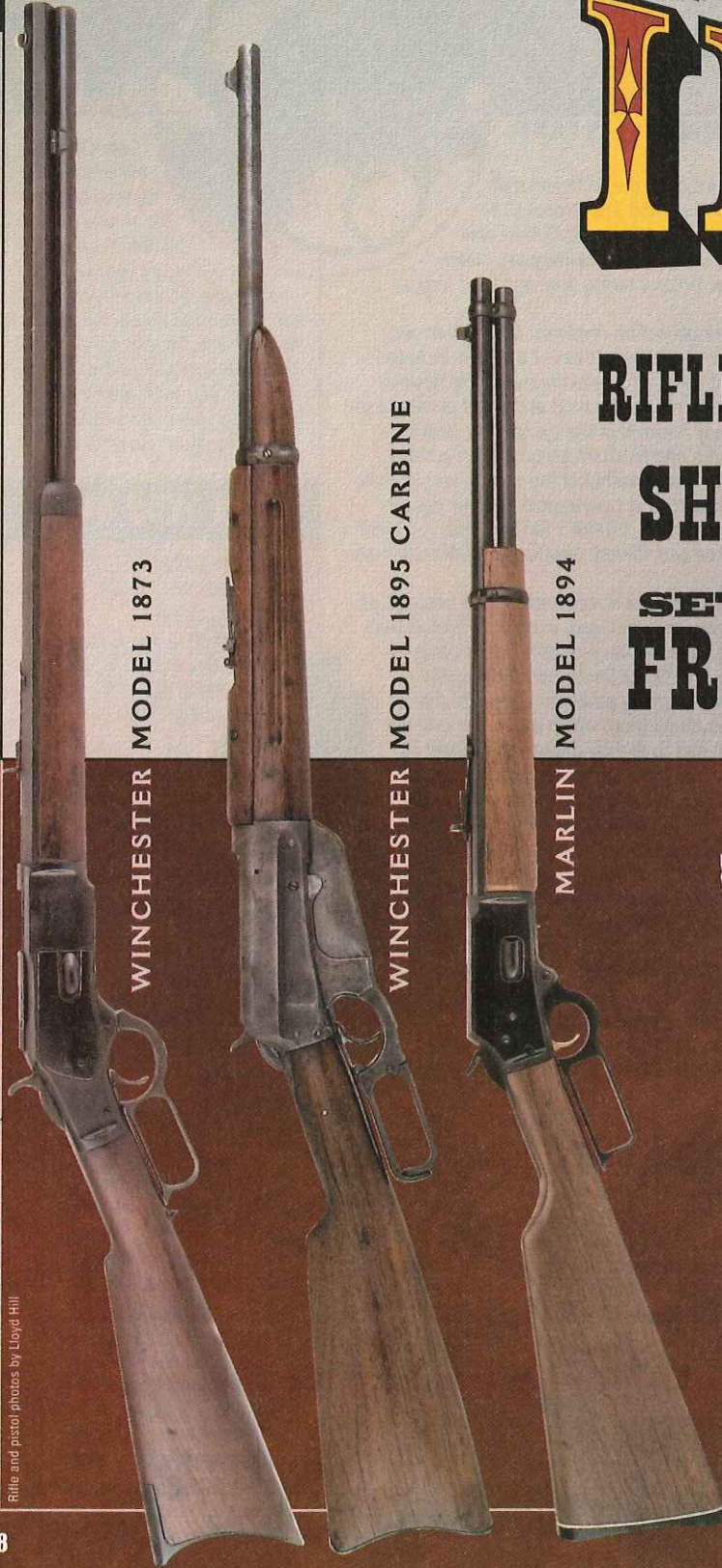


OLD WEST IRON

By Philip Schreier

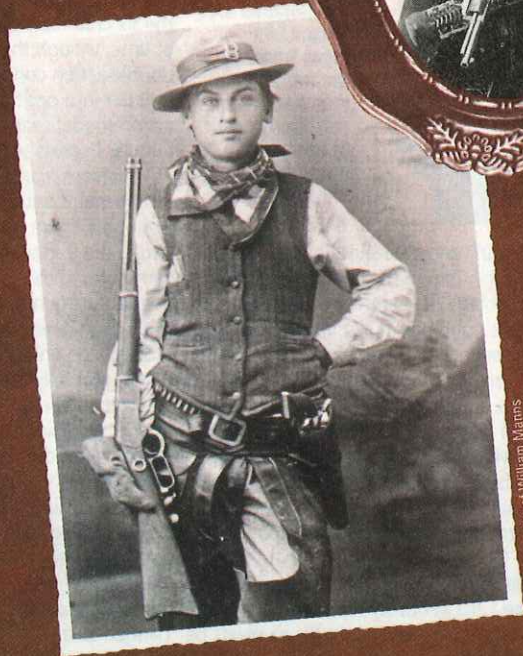
THE RIFLES, PISTOLS AND SHOTGUNS THAT SETTLED A FRONTIER



WINCHESTER MODEL 1873

WINCHESTER MODEL 1895 CARBINE

MARLIN MODEL 1894



Rifle and pistol photos by Lloyd Hill

Photo courtesy of William Mann's

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he Gun that Won the West" is a phrase that is often used to describe any number of different firearms that were produced and used by the cowboys, lawmen and outlaws of the Old West. The names Colt and Winchester quickly come to mind as two of the foremost purveyors of shooting iron from the years 1849-1916, from the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California to General John Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico.

They say that some things succeed in life when fate matches them up with the right time and place. When it comes to telling the story of the Old West and the firearms used to tame that great frontier, no names other than that of Colonel Samuel Colt and Oliver Winchester stand as tall or as a better example of being at the right place at the right time with THE right invention.

When gold was discovered in Sutter's Mill, Calif., thousands rushed to the western regions in search of fortune. A good reliable firearm would be as essential as a pick and shovel for those who expected to find "gold in them thar hills" and hoped to keep what they found for themselves.

It was Samuel Colt who perfected the system that we today know as the revolver. While an apprentice seaman, he noticed the ratchet-like



Photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson

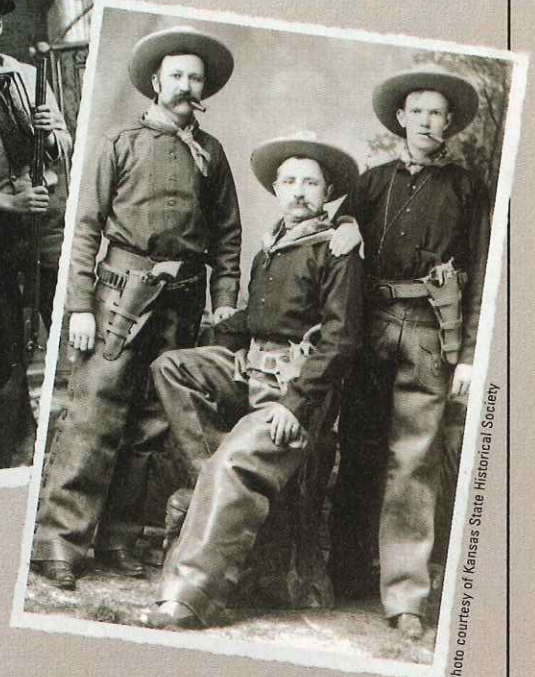
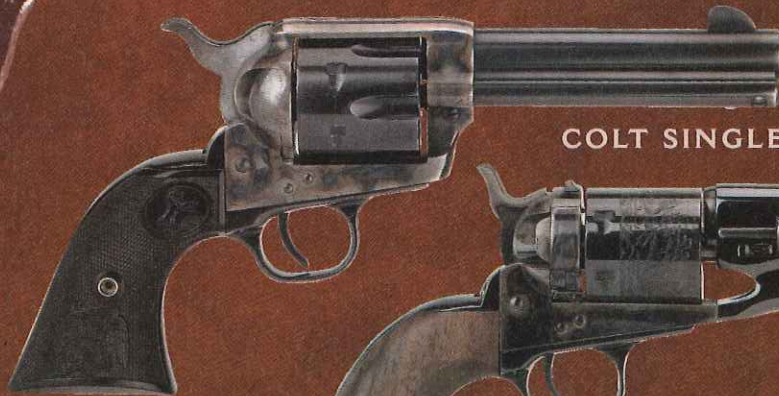


Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society

In the photo at top left is Charles N. Strauss, first Jewish sheriff of Tucson, Ariz., and his son. Strauss is armed with a Winchester Model 1876, while his son is holding a Belgian double-barreled shotgun. The three cowboys pictured at right with the Colt Single-Action Army Revolvers are actually Dodge City businessmen.

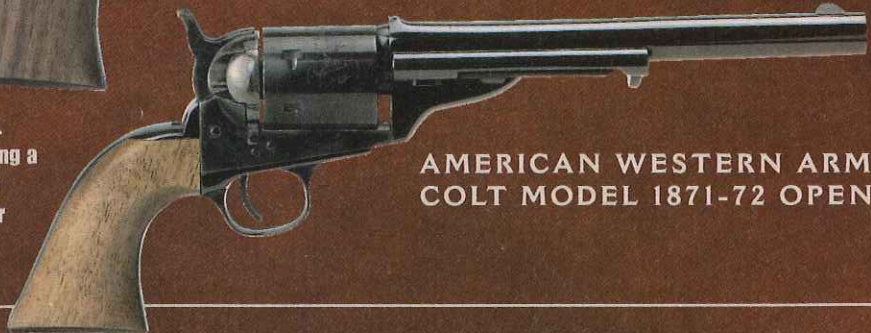
Photo courtesy of William Manns



COLT SINGLE-ACTION ARMY REVOLVER



AMERICAN WESTERN ARMS COLT NAVY MODEL 1861 CONVERSION



AMERICAN WESTERN ARMS COLT MODEL 1871-72 OPEN TOP

The cowgirl with the Colt Single-Action Revolver at top was actually a showgirl with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. The cowboy pictured at left is sporting a Colt Single-Action Army revolver in a cross draw holster and a Winchester Model 1873 Carbine



Photo courtesy of William Manns

The Colt Single-Action Army Revolver with reloading equipment and brass.

movement of the ship's main wheel. Bored and looking for something to carve with his knife, he set about making a crude handgun model where a wheel-like cylinder held five chambers and was rotated into place by pulling back on a hammer that caused a ratchet to advance and lock the cylinder into place. This cylinder when attached to a single barrel would be a very practical and efficient way to fire more than one shot. When he returned home he took out a patent in 1836 on his revolver mechanism and the rest is, as they say, history...well sorta, kinda, maybe... you see Sam Colt went bankrupt and lost his revolver business just a few years later when his new pistol design failed to capture the imagination of anyone, most importantly anyone in the U.S. government who had the authority to purchase new weapons for the U.S. Military.

But as fate would have it, Sam Colt's new gun did find its way into the hands of a Texas Ranger named Samuel Walker who liked the idea and went looking for Colt who had been out of business

for some time. Walker asked Colt if he could beef up the puny little five-shot revolver he had originally designed and come up with a gun that would withstand the rigors of service on the frontier. Colt and Walker developed a six-shot .44 cal. revolver that weighed in at over 4 1/2 lbs. The initial muzzle velocity made it the most powerful production revolver for nearly 130 years! Walker ordered 1,000 of them for the U.S. Mounted Dragoons and that started a chain of government contracts that has continued unbroken to this day.

A second great expansion westward came after the end of the Civil War (1861-1865) when the railroad and stage-coach lines began to service the new territories out west. By this time, metallic cartridges

like we know them today became popular, replacing the old cap-n-ball system of percussion caps and loose powder used until that time. In 1873, Colt, introduced the Single-Action Army revolver, or

The Peacemaker as it was affectionately known. It quickly became the best known gun of the Old West. Over 300,000 were made and sold between 1873 and 1916. Easily the most recognized pistol of its day, the Peacemaker is still being produced by Colt and now others who cater to those who desire to own a symbol of our historic past for recreational shooting, as well as the new sport of cowboy action shooting.

Chief among Colt's competitors was the firm of Smith & Wesson of Springfield, Mass. Having perfected the concept of metallic cartridges in 1858, Smith & Wesson held a monopoly on the cartridge firing handgun market for a number of years. Perhaps its most successful model was an improvement made on the #3 Frame American series of revolvers. The large six-shot revolver featured a design allowing the user to open and eject spent cartridge casings one handed! This was a great advantage to the mounted troopers of the frontier, for the Colt model required the use of both hands and took a relatively long period of time to unload and reload.

The design was refined by Maj. George Schofield of the U.S. Cavalry in 1873 and today models bearing his design patent inscription bring a premium to collectors. Unfortunately for Schofield, Smith & Wesson chose to chamber the new gun in a cartridge that they felt convinced would become the standard on the frontier. Like the old argument between choosing Beta or VHS, S&W chose wrong and their cartridge for the Schofield never gained popularity, and interest in the gun waned considerably with only some 6,000 guns manufactured.

That wasn't the first business defeat suffered by Smith & Wesson in the old days. The partners, Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson, had at one time attempted to market a lever-action repeating rifle that fired fixed ammunition. Years of experiments and failures to perfect the "Volcanic" line of rifles and pistols caused the partners to seek financial

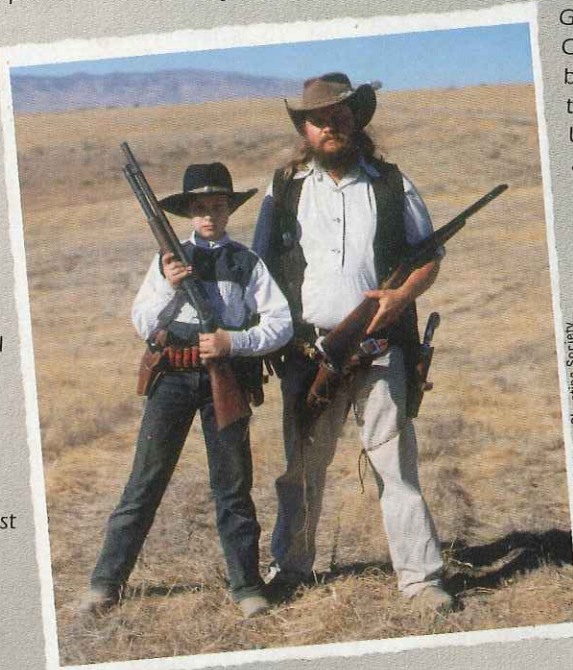


Photo courtesy of Single Action Shooting Society

A pair of cowboy action enthusiasts with their shotguns.



Photo courtesy of William Marns

Colt was king to the working cowboy like these pictured above, heading for dinner.

assistance from other sources. Soon a shirt maker from Connecticut was brought in as a silent partner in the business. Before long, the company was without a functioning product and the amount of debt owed the silent partner amounted to more than the company was worth at the time. An agreement was struck where Smith & Wesson could walk away from the partnership without debt and the silent partner would assume all liabilities and assets of the company in return for sole ownership.

The silent partner was Oliver Winchester, another man who would make a fortune by being in the right place at the right time with the perfect product. Not long after the S&W team abandoned the lever action project, their old shop foreman, Benjamin Tyler Henry, perfected the mechanism with the use of fixed ammo (.44 rimfire). Soon, the New Haven Repeating Arms Company was known worldwide as the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Today, the Winchester lever action rifle is synony-

mous with any representation of the Old West. Made in more calibers and varieties than any other rifle of its type, the Winchester 1894 is still being produced 106 years after its introduction!

Shotguns played an important role in the gathering of food and the close defensive support they offered the lawmen and the lawless. However, unlike most pistol and rifle manufacturers, shotguns were hardly produced in numbers approaching those of the pistols and rifles of the same period due to the fact that the country was flooded with inexpensive Belgian side-by-sides or converted Civil War Army muskets. Perhaps the

Winchester 1897 pump action was the first production shotgun that enjoyed a wide following. Hundreds were carried on the frontier by the men of the U.S. military and during World War I they earned the nickname of "trench broom" for their effectiveness in the trenches. 🦅



Photo courtesy of William Marns

Rifle and revolver ammunition came in a variety of calibers in the Old West.