

THE GUN THAT WON THE WEST

by Gerald G. Fox



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The familiar title of this article, something of an "old bromo" in itself, not only poses a question of identification that can have no one positive answer, but is a presumptuous assertion open to controversy. Some students of history, for instance, contend the humble covered wagon, not the firearm, stands as the symbol of the winning of the West. As a collector of certain firearms I had better state my point of view at the outset and select a period in which a mode of society was established which I shall call the winning of the West.

Anything west of Worcester is "out West" to the proper Bostonian, and when I left Boston for my present home town in Massachusetts, they thought Longmeadow synonymous with The Great Plains. I shall live my score of years in confusion and ignorance of where the West begins. However my collector interests clearly begin with the post Civil War years, post Reconstruction years. The cartridge West is my West. I'm a Single Action man of 1872 with a one tract mind scarcely liberal enough to include the earlier conversion cartridge pieces and that period.

The accomplishments of the eighteen seventies, eighties and nineties entrenched a mode of living that I call the winning of the

West, in preference to the earlier exploits of the pathfinders in their covered wagons.

In trying to solve the riddle as to which gun or guns won the West this paper suggests three definite avenues or approaches leading to a conclusion, if not the solution, as follows:

I. What guns in the West in the seventies were so popular that leading gun dealers of the time pushed the sale of them, advertised them on their commercial letterheads? Dealers of their day staked their reputation and livelihood on the popular contemporary acceptance of the firearms listed on their letterheads. Hence such genuine token of this popularity could have some real bearing on the solution.

II. The gun or guns that won the West were certainly to be found in the hands of the men who won the West, so we might look to the arms issued to our boys in blue, the cavalry or the U.S. Army. Certainly this military group was the ultimate source of strength that stormed the territory when needed and most deserving of the honor of gaining first glory in the winning of the West.

III. The principle theme of this article will suggest that the winning of the West was largely a logistical problem. Such a feat primarily should be credited to those outfits, those companies, those men who were concerned with logistics, the problems of communication and transportation. We shall credit Wells Fargo with a major effort in this field and with most of the glory of winning the West. The guns that won the West must have been part of the equipment belonging to Wells Fargo.

I Dealers' Choice

The influence of the Springfield Armory was felt in a secondary role, namely through the Ordnance Department Inspectors operating out of Springfield covering and inspecting all arms for government purchase that were manufactured at the Colt plant. An example of this practice from Civil War days is recorded in a letter dated 20 November 1861, addressed to General James Wolfe Ripley, Chief of Ordnance, from Capt. George T. Balch, Ordnance Corps, at Springfield Armory. This letter is included in a bound volume of Ordnance Dept. letters originating at the Springfield Armory between 1861 and 1862 which I loaned for display at the recent Wadsworth Atheneum Colt exhibition. The following extracts are from Captain Balch's letter:

"The matter of the sale of Colts pistols by the Colts P.F.A. Co. to parties other than the Ordnance Department has engaged my attention"

"I shall have six inspectors at work there the last of this week."

"There is a disposition manifested to push work on to the inspectors which the foremen know is not what it should be. It is the natural effect of the demands we make. To use up the bad parts a complement of good ones are added and a serviceable pistol made. But it cannot exceed 100 pistols per week. The rate we are receiving them this week is 1000 per week."

"Almost all these pistols can be detected by the following marks, a small o, or CENTER PUNCH MARK under or over the number of the pistols on the barrels, guard, strap and frame."

"The Department may rest satisfied that every pistol of this kind on sale by the trade is not up to government standards in all respects, and if the Department has been purchasing pistols through such resources, they have been paying a premium of \$5 per pistol for a bad article."

"With a view to protect the Department and check any disposition on the part of Col. Colt to evade your instructions for the sake of getting higher prices, I would respectfully suggest a circular letter to all officers."

end of quotation from Balch's letter.

The extracts quoted from Balch's official letter should clarify the meaning of the CENTER PUNCH MARK frequently found on Colt presentation revolvers during the Civil War period, indicating rejection by government inspectors under the supervision of the Ordnance officer at Springfield Armory. It is extremely unlikely that Sam Colt would select a similar mark for special attention by his workmen as some enthusiastic Colt collectors have wishfully suggested.

Larry Wilson and I thought it would be amusing to display this letter from Balch to Ripley next to a presentation Colt revolver inscribed to Ripley from Colt and bearing CENTER PUNCH marks as indicated. Sam Colt has been described as "an early payola man of tremendous proportions, a promotor of great scope, an entrepreneur and a man who knew how to make a buck in a hundred happy ways." Let's assume "Savvy Sam" somehow twisted the purpose of the CENTER PUNCH MARK to his own use. In fairness to him, I should note that the rigid mathematical specifications for these Civil War Colts are clearly stated in other Ordnance Department letters contained in this official volume. It is conceivable these specifications could have been slightly avoided so that some revolvers might find their way into private hands, and legally so, once center punched by a government inspector. Otherwise how do you explain the presentation revolver, center punched, and inscribed to General Ripley?

This interesting diversion from the main theme of my article is now concluded, and illustrates the secondary role of influence exerted by the Springfield Armory on government issued arms.

III Wells Fargo

The winning of the West has been claimed by several manufacturers of various firearms. I have attributed that distinction to the U.S. Army or Cavalry and to the arms generally issued to them.

In a larger sense however the winning of such a large area seems to me to be dependent mostly on communications and transportation, or as the military mind would put it, on logistics. A landing party may force a beach head, but its success in the long run depends on its logistical support.

The cold war of today between East and West continues not only the old search for the secret weapon but the eternal struggle for dominance in transportation and communication translated into terms of rockets etc. All of this was equally true in the winning of the West that concerns us in this article.

There are in the annals of the American West many names that appeal to our heroic imagination: Santa Fe, Union Pacific, the Oregon Trail, Dodge City, Pony Express, the Staked Plains, Virginia City, the Chisholm Trace, Tombstone, Gould and Curry, Sutter's Mill, Washoe, The Overland Trail. They are more than mere places or institutions or even legends, for they were a vital part of the fabric of old times and they dramatically shaped our destiny.

One of these names is Wells Fargo — Wells Fargo, an empire, a vast domain of wealth and wealthy properties, of coaches, horses, and stage houses — an institution dedicated to transportation and communication and equipped with the power and the firearms, and the blood and guts required to tame a frontier land. At some times and in many places Wells Fargo enjoyed an absolute monopoly not only of transportation but of law enforcement (such as it was) and of the facilities and functions of finance. Its province was literally the Old West of the United States. Beginning with the early fifties in San Francisco and continuing for over 50 years it was almost impossible to exist beyond the influence of the activities of Wells Fargo — the very foundation upon which rested shotgun law and arbitrary order. In a very real sense, therefore, Wells Fargo was the State.

From the beginning Wells Fargo was a participant in almost every frontier commotion of the Old West. Among the many powder burnings of epic proportions involving Wells Fargo employees was the great battle at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone. Again, the stock tender for Wells Fargo at Rock Creek in 1861 was Bill Hickok. In the saga of the Pony Express, Wells Fargo asserted its dramatic leadership. Lucius Beebe in his authoritative book entitled "U.S. West" makes this statement:

"The pattern of California, Nevada, Oregon, and Arizona and to an only slightly lesser extent New Mexico and Montana was the pattern of Wells Fargo. There were places where for a time, Wells Fargo was in essence, in symbol and in fact the West of the United States."

The six horse stage coach and the little, iron-bound, green treasure box still are the hallmarks of Wells Fargo's mastery of time and distance and part of the essential properties of the Old West immortalized in legend and in literature.

If you would know the guns that won the West look to the arms carried by the Wells Fargo employees, the shot gun guards, the armed messengers, the local agents; look to the firearms carried by the thousands of employees — in 1898 the company employed over 6000 of them. Among these weapons you would find the shotgun (Ithica and Remington predominantly), the Schofield Smith and Wesson, the Colt Single Action. Perhaps the most generally accepted and the most useful in the unskilled hands of the average employee was the shotgun — America's most successful and most dangerous arm.

IV The Single Action Picture

Parsons, Serven, Haven and Belden have identified the Single Action — "the only revolver which was put out in the transition period during the seventies that is still manufactured" — "the traditional arm of the Old West" — "the paramount symbol of a battlefield between the forces of the law and banditry" — "the favorite choice among hand firearms of frontiersmen and cowboys" — "the longest popularity of any model

of revolver yet made" — "the outstanding leader among weapons of its kind in numbers produced" — as much a participant in "American folklore as the picturesque users of the gun itself" — "a legend, a word inseparable from pioneering in America" — "if we were to single out the one revolver which has been most prominent in making America Colt conscious the Single Action Frontier must be that revolver." Such is the opinion of the experts and leaves only a little to be added to my favorite subject the Colt Single Action as follows:

A dynamic era beginning in Paterson, New Jersey in 1836 ended abruptly twenty-six years later in 1862 in Hartford with the death of Sam Colt and the production of the last model of a long line of percussion revolvers. Apparently the productive genius behind the Colt percussion models ended at that time.

During the Civil War years and for the next decade the company merely continued the production of some of their older established models as invented by the founder or developed under his leadership. From time to time, of course, the company, hampered by the restrictions of patents in the hands of competitors, experimented with dubious success with various conversions and other types of conversions. Their dilemma was typical of the ill success of the Root patent of 4 June 1867.

Many sophisticated Colt collectors are deservedly proud to concentrate their collecting interest within the percussion period when the reputation of Colt, the man and the gun, found no equal in firearm circles throughout the world at that time.

Yet oddly enough, the most famous individual model revolver the world has ever known, the Peacemaker or Single Action Army, was first produced in 1872, ten years after the death of the great salesman Sam. It became the favorite side arm of its day to such an extent that the words "Single Action" soon came to denote a single product by a single manufacturer when in reality these words (Single Action) merely describe a mechanical feature most common to the majority of firearms produced for more than a century.

In truth, the mechanics of this cartridge revolver dominated an era whose exploits and way of life were considerably molded by its mechanical advantages and limitations. In my opinion the romantic picturesque era of the Single Action may have unfairly dwarfed the importance of earlier periods in American history. And remember the popularity of the Single Action was achieved in a period free from large organized warfare (save for the Indian uprisings and more personal feuds) — a time when the Colt Company could find few if any generals, those bearded darlings of their day fresh from heroic victories, to whom lavish presentations could be made. No, the Single Action sold itself into the hands and hearts of the users purely on its own unexcelled merits.

Today 90 years after its birth, the Single Action is still so popular several companies compete for its popular, present-day acclaim. Although annual production figures show fluctuations the popularity of the Single Action has been continuous, indicating production of the Single Action by various companies at various times will easily span more than a century, and no revolver comes even close to this record.

Here indeed is a firearm that played a major role in the winning of the West whether in the hands of cavalryman, infantryman, Wells Fargo employee, frontiersman, cattleman, settler, lawman or bandit.

Editor's note: Gerald now proclaims that his first love is Colt Single Actions. We who know him know that he is an inveterate collector having had top quality collections of early American oil burning Betty Lamps, scrimshaw decorated ivory, a fabulous collection of gauges used in the production of U.S. military flint and percussion pistols, a stack of Patersons and they say that his middle initial "G" stands for Gatling. His present slogan we are told is "Think big — collect Gatling Guns."