

"SAMUEL COLT PRESENTS" IN THE MAKING

by Larry Wilson



LARRY WILSON

Officers, members and visitors of the American Society of Arms Collectors when asked to speak before you I was in somewhat of a quandry as I realized that all of you are experts in your own field of collecting. I therefore have chosen as my subject one that I know something about first hand having had some experience in the preparation and execution of the "COLT PRESENTS" exhibition and display.

I think that you will readily understand that one of the biggest problems over the weeks and months required is to keep up your interest. It required many miles of traveling and many hours of work. We hit a few stone walls but managed to get over them in fairly good shape. I think that one's background has quite a little in putting together an exhibition like this and I am going to give you a little bit on that first.

Most of you have kind of seen me appear out of a cloud. If all that Mr. Charles Cunningham, Director of Wadsworth Atheneum says is true regarding my health then my soon to be published obituary should read something like this; born 1939, lived in Minnesota until 1959, lived occasionally in Columbus, Ohio until late 1961, lately at Carlton College, Northfield, Minnesota, specialties in history, art and art history, special interest arms and armor, museum experience at the Cochran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Arms and Armor Museum in London and then to the Wadsworth here in Hartford. Ac-

ording to this obituary the death was through murder and the deed was performed by an anonymous "Samuel Colt Presents" lender whose name the deceased had released.

When the Wadsworth put me on the payroll about a year and three months ago I came there to work on Samuel Colt's private collection and to try and clear it up as it had sat in storage for about five or ten years. It had been on exhibition for a few years but had never quite properly been exhibited and unfortunately when I finally finished the job we were only able to put about one half, about one hundred items, on show; some of the best things will be put out within the next few weeks. John Pearson experimental rifles are amongst them.

For the help to tackle the assignment of working on Colt's private collection I decided the wisest thing to do would be to get in touch with some people that I knew had far more experience and knowledge in Colt firearms than I so I got in touch with John duMont for one and went to Greenfield, Massachusetts in July of 1960 and he had several good ideas and suggestions. One of his suggestions was that we have a show of "Presentation Colts" and that we return Sam Colt's collection to exhibition. This idea was passed on to Mr. Cunningham and he and I returned to Greenfield later that month and the idea was accepted almost immediately and I think it was very helpful in getting the idea across to Mr. Cunningham that Mr. duMont had a rather impressive collection of paintings.

Very little was done on the loan exhibition in the Summer of 1960 although a tentative list to include was drawn up and the rough date for the exhibition were set. First we were going to start in

October 1961 and quit the show in December but in order to coincide with the meeting dates of the American Society we changed the dates from October to November 3rd as the opening and decided to run it through into January. This also was in part in connection with the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Samuel Colt.

I left the Wadsworth in September of 1960 and from September to January my time was spent in London working at the Armoury, the London experience was actually part of a school program for which I was supposed to receive credit assuming of course that I did all of the required school work but knowing that this was pretty much of a chance of a lifetime I didn't crack a book all the time I was there. I spent most of my time visiting museums and when ever possible meeting arms and armor people outside. I must admit that Colts were the last on the agenda and most of what I learned there on Colts was not used in Samuel Colt Presents. The important exception would be the pistols and the two pistol boxes that were lent to us by Queen Elizabeth II and these were found at Windsor Castle exhibited in what might be termed a basement room and were hard to see because they were in an alcove and the alcove was roped off and it just happened that one of the fellows at the Tower Armoury knew that there was at least one Colt and in his snooping around found the inlaid cases and the three pistols. Of course inlaid cases of that type are a little scarce. Unfortunately most of the accessories were lost as I suppose that all of the royal children played cowboys and Indians and these were the best guns that they had on hand.

A fair number of museums and private collectors in Europe were contacted but Colts at that time were so far out of my mind that several times when I visited a museum or visited a private collector I would simply forget to ask about them at all. Most of my attention was given to European armor which is, I think, the field that I prefer over all others.

Last January I came back to this country went straight to Hartford on money that I borrowed from relatives who were very conveniently placed right in New York City. When I got back into this country I had thirty-five cents and I don't know how many publications on Arms and Armor which fortunately I was able to get ahold of. At the Wadsworth I simply knocked off some correspondence in reply to some that had come in my absence and left them in about mid January and went back to my school in Minnesota. Mr. Cunningham had very conveniently arranged a draft free leave of absence for me from the educational institution and so I was able to start the last of January and spend this entire year at the Wadsworth Atheneum with the specific purposes of working on the Samuel Colt Presents and the Samuel Colt private collection.

When I came back to the Wadsworth last January I spent February and early March trying to find out information on Colt's private collection, a great deal of the time was spent at the Connecticut Historical Society trying to locate information on Colt's London operation in an effort to get some data on the pistols located at the Windsor Castle, Hartford as you must know is awfully rich in Colt manuscript material in fact Mrs. E. Sanderson Cushman, grand-niece of Samuel Colt, found some papers that I think have never been published before. One of them was the original commission from Thomas H. Seymour to Samuel Colt for Lt. Colonel or Colonel and she brought them to the museum just recently. So I spent a good deal of time at the Historical Society pouring through manuscripts as I think they have five thousand Colt manuscripts and are kept in twenty filing boxes. It is amazing the amount of material that has never been used before. Some of the material used in the Catalogue came from here such as letters to Colt thanking him for presentation pistols. Unfortunately I didn't have the chance to completely go through the collection and I am going to start that again in a few weeks and I think there is a possibility that some papers will be found there that will relate to some pieces that were in the exhibition and some that we didn't request for the show.

Beginning in early March I had to stop working at the Historical Society and do some school work that I didn't do while I was in Europe and I am sure that you can understand that I enjoyed that very

much and I was only able to give the Wadsworth a forty hour week for about six weeks and that threw a kink in the work as far as I was concerned.

Starting on April 15th I finally took the examinations that I was supposed to take and settled back to the work that really had to be done to get this exhibition done. Nearly the entire show was organized between April 15th and the 5th of September which was the dead-line for the catalogue. If you are the least bit interested the average work-day was sixteen hours, seven days a week and I really didn't stop that until about October 4th. Being somewhat youthful I think I got away with it with the exception of losing a little weight that I was glad to get rid of and now my best coat I have fits me at my lowest weight and I don't intend to get it back. (Editor's note. . . I think he weighs about 110 pounds soaking wet.) Of course if the excess weight is in the form of money I am always glad to carry it around. I believe that if I had known at the time the amount of work involved I think I would have gotten on a train and cut-out of Hartford last April.

The jobs really started to snow-ball in April and nobody really had an idea just what was ahead. It just gradually got bigger and bigger and no one could see just how big it would get until it was too late to get back all the money we had spent, and there was plenty of it spent. We decided to seek out for this exhibition Colt percussion arms and particularly those of presentation nature with inscriptions. We were also of course interested in decorated items and good cased items even though not engraved or presentation inscribed. We aimed for a good representation of the various models and variations. Of course Samuel Colt didn't have this all in mind when he had things written on a back-strap or some other place on the gun. I might as well relate here roughly the procedure in getting all of this stuff together. The major ingredients were books, periodicals, catalogues, correspondence and travel. At first the records that I kept were on small 4x5 record cards on which were mimeographed spaces for serial numbers, other technical data, owners names, etc., but these became too small for all of the information and I switched to 8½ x 11 sheets. The format on these large sheets was such that the information for the catalogue could be taken off with little change. As the time to get the catalogue together was getting short this sheet saved much time. Possibly the major book was "Colt Firearms" by Mr. James Serven that most of you collectors own. Another was the fine catalogue of the Colt exhibition in 1942 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some of the pieces in that exhibition were used in our show. The Gun Collector Magazine published in Wisconsin for several years was quite valuable and some of the issues of The Texas Gun Collector came in very handy. We also used various dealers lists and catalogues but with these it was rather hard to locate the present owners. The part of the exhibition which is the so-called visual material such as paintings, prints, drawings, the old Colt broadsides etc that part was formed by Edward Bryant who was the Wadsworth general curator until about two days ago, he is now in New York City at the Whitney Gallery.

In correspondence as you can well imagine the name of the Wadsworth Atheneum was a good shoe-horn prying things loose. I would say that if I had tried to do this as a private individual it would have been quite difficult. I wrote to about sixty European museums but not a thing that was found that way was used although there was one terrific outfit, a pair of Theur conversions of 1860 Armies gold and silver plated and engraved, contour casing, complete with accessories and two spare cylinders. These are in a museum in Egypt you can go and try to get them if you are interested but you have to fight your way by Nasser and do your best, I think they would be worth fighting for. I don't know if they have any history but judging from the picture they sent me they are something special. We also wrote to about 120 private museums in this country, little was found but such museums are not as co-operative as a rule as individuals. I, of course, tried to contact as many private owners as possible. And frequently a collector would divulge the information on a piece that he had been working on for some time. One of the finest pieces in the exhibition was found that way. That is one of the guns that was lent anonymously. I am not prepared to announce those names at this time. . . . at least without being paid. My price is high, believe me. The correspondence and personal visits were the two methods that got most of the things for us.

On the trips I went where I could even though the expense was really a burden for the Atheneum. I tried to space them every few weeks and at that time I would sneak into Mr. Cunningham's office and lay-it-on-the-line, so to speak and say in the softest terms possible that I wanted to go down to New York City, Washington, D.C. but the climax was when I wanted to go to Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Wyoming. We kind of did a crescendo on that one and as the thing snow-balled he gradually agreed to letting the trips go ahead. I think more travel was done in putting this exhibition together than any show the Atheneum has put on and of course that means a lot of expense. There were many short trips nearby in Connecticut and Massachusetts and there are still plenty of good Colts around here, down to New York City several times, West Point and Hyde Park, Baltimore, Annapolis, Philadelphia and Boston. The longest trip of all being the trip to the Southwest and West and I was accompanied by Irving Blomstrann the museum photographer and I think Irving lost more weight on that trip than I did in the entire time I put in here at the Wadsworth. He has always been very willing to work hard but for two weeks he was climbing up and down the ladder, bumping his head on the ceilings, but fortunately he never fell off the ladder or broke his ton of equipment. The catalogue will show that he did a very fine job. I might state that on this single exhibition the Wadsworth spent three times their annual allowance for exhibitions. That is a rather large fortune for a museum. We are not completely through so the expenses may go to possibly four times. Now when someone at the museum wants to do some painting or repairs the stock answer is that Larry Wilson has spent all our money and we can't do a damn thing for another three or four years.

By the first week in August we had pretty well made up our mind what we wanted to do. While Irving and I were on the Southwestern trip the request for loans were sent out and I had asked the museum officials to request that certain pieces be sent by mid August because we had not had the opportunity to photograph and study perhaps a hundred of these items but accidentally none of these hundred pieces were requested to come by mid August. So when we got back we received the bad news that none of the guns were coming until about October 15th. That caused the biggest complication in the preparations. It was necessary that I get on the long distance phone and telegrams and get some of the guns rolling. The longest phone call was to London but it paid off handsomely. The two weeks that were spent phoning to get the guns here were probably the two most expensive weeks in the history of the Atheneum. I think it is an understatement to say that the expense was stupendous, never again, unless I'm back for another show and I think that is rather doubtful.

The catalogue was begun three weeks before the September 5th dead-line. We meant it to be a complete record of the exhibition. No attempt was made in the book to duplicate information that can be found in gun books. We felt that any one who bought the catalogue would have the better books published before, we felt it a good idea to be as original in text as we could. We tried for standardization in listing all of the data. The completed manuscript was about 225 typewritten pages, double spaced. The Connecticut Printers were a little frantic as they had been allotted roughly one month to print the catalogue and they didn't get going until about September 15th, roughly it takes about three months for such a job. Things got tougher when finally we finished with 320 pages with cuts of various sizes and placements plus other miscellaneous material. When ever I saw them getting hot under the collar I made myself scarce. I think everybody over there is bigger than me and I know they are all stronger, even the women. They got to the printing as soon as possible and got the stuff to the binder three weeks ago and then they all collapsed and I haven't seen any of them since. The catalogues, enough to take care of the opening arrived Friday morning and we opened on Saturday.

The assembling of the exhibition was begun about October 23rd, we accumulated display cases from all over the museum. Some needed repairs, some linings, some special lighting and we had to devise ways and means of displaying the arms. The arrangements of the objects in the exhibition varied somewhat from the catalogue as we had to try to reach the general public as well as collectors. The catalogue was slanted at the collectors, the exhibition the public. The labels were written for the

layman rather than collectors so we tried to keep them simple and not go into the rare variations. We started with the Patersons and worked our way up to the 1862 Police Model. We tried to do some grouping such as the Gold Rush arms, Book Casings, Gold Inlaid specimens, John B. Floyd set etc. We finished up on Friday about noon and opened Saturday.

Gentlemen I thank you for your cooperation and attention, may we meet again.

Editor's note.... This young man is a comer in his chosen field. He has selected museum work as a career. He has outstanding ability, knowledge, a sense of humor and a true love for his work. Remember his name and help him if you can. We all enjoyed working with him.