

IN PURSUIT OF COLTS

by Paul C. Mitchell

I am sure every collector has sat admiring a favorite arm in his collection and speculated and dreamed about the possible history of the piece. Sometimes our fancy runs wild and, in our mind, we develop quite an interesting history of ownership and heroic deeds in which it has played an important part. If we hear of a piece with a substantially authenticated history and think we have some sort of a chance to own it, we're likely to "kick the covers" off many nights while trying to acquire it. Such was the case with me—not one but two Colt pistols that I became interested in and felt that I could not live without.

A friend of mine was Chief of Bureau for the Associated Press, living in New Delhi, India, for many years. He became the friend of the Maharaja of Indore, India, and hunted tigers with him on his estate. During the course of their friendship the Maharaja gave my friend a Colt London Navy and a Colt London Dragoon which had belonged to his Grandfather, Yeshwant Rao Holkar, Maharaja of Indore. Of course I heard about them and was intrigued by their history and with each letter I became more and more interested in owning them myself.

In my quest for the guns, I learned a little history of India, which is divided into many states. At the head of each state was a Maharaja who ruled and "lived high on the Hog" at the expense of the common people. They accumulated vast estates and great fortunes for themselves. When India attained independence from Great Britain in 1947 these Maharajas were granted "privy purses" of up to \$1,000,000 a year for giving up sovereignty over their principalities. Mrs. Gandhi ended their princely privileges in 1970, in effect reducing them to commoners.

One of these old-time Maharajas was the original owner of the two Colts that were bugging me. They were in the Armory at the palace in Indore when the state government took it over for public offices. The Grandson of the Maharaja, Rao Holkar, was still in the palace at this time. He liberated the Colts and gave them to my friend. In his letter to me he described the pistols in glowing terms and, of course, he was elated over his good fortune. I wrote many letters pleading for an opportunity to own them myself, but to no avail.

A few years later this friend was put in charge of the Caribbean area for Associated Press and stationed in Havana, Cuba. From Cuba I thought my chances of getting the Navy and Dragoon would be much improved. More letters gave me more history but no more encouragement.

The background of the Holkar Family was extremely interesting. Holkar is the family name of the old ruling family of Indore. During the days of

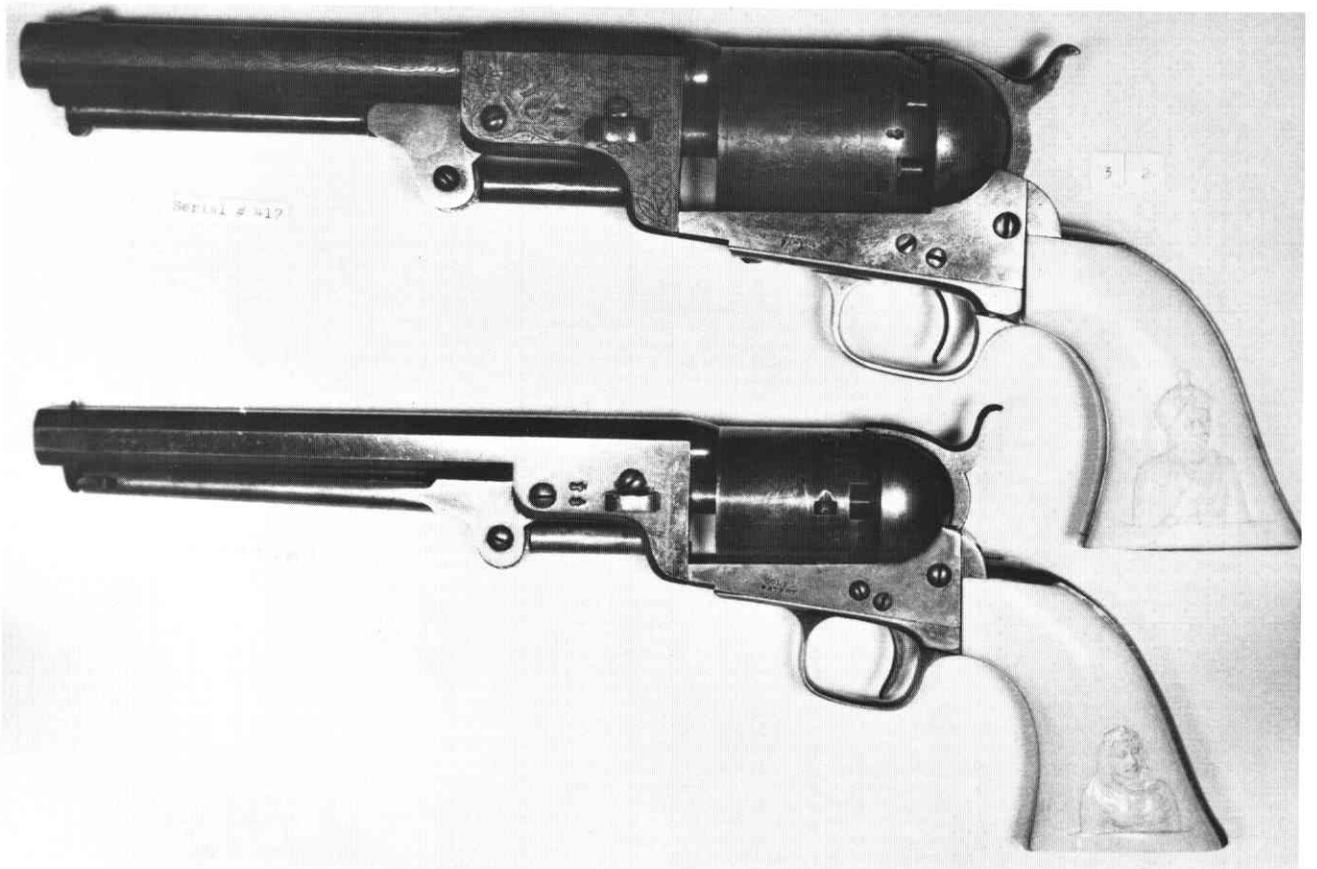


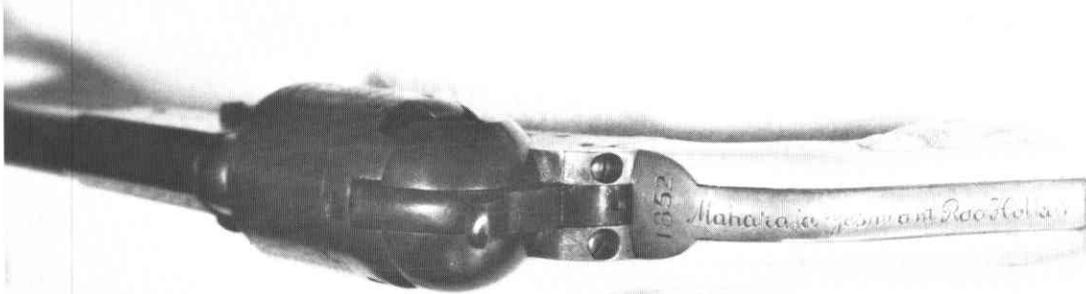
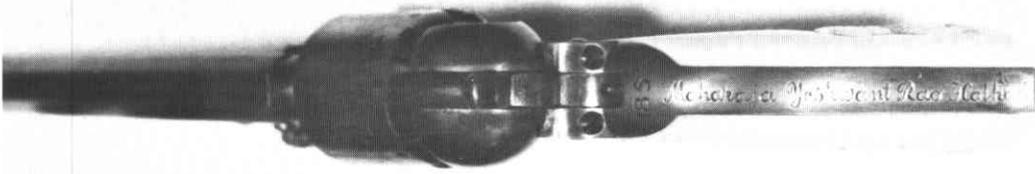
British occupation, about 1926, the son of Maharaja Yeshwant Rao Holkar had a favorite girl friend in the palace who ran away with her boy friend lover. This ruler had the pair pursued by some of his followers to Bombay where there was a struggle in which the lover was killed. The British Government gave the Maharaja a choice of abdicating or being tried for murder. He chose the former, and his son ruled until India took over all such princely estates after World War II. It was this last Maharaja (the grandson) who was a friend of my friend and gave him the Colts. Incidentally, he married Fay Watt Crane of Los Angeles, and to bring the Holkar family history further up to date: their son, Richard Holkar, attended Stanford University and a few years ago, married Sally Budd, daughter of C. Burcham Budd, Jr., of Dallas, Texas.

To get back to the Colts: when Castro took over Cuba he confiscated all personal property of my friend—automobile, furniture and everything except what he carried out in a flight bag. He was on the first evacuation plane to arrive in Miami, and very happy to be there. He called me in Illinois and said he needed some money and wanted to know if I was still interested in the Colt Dragoon and Navy. It so happened that I was, and we agreed on a price. So I bought them and have given them a good home for fourteen years.

The Navy, serial number 35594, is cased with the armory catalog number on the end of the case. The backstrap is inscribed "1855 Maharaja Yeshwant Rao Holkar". It has carved ivory grips with the likeness of the Maharaja and the Maharani added later. The carving, according to aides of the last Maharaja, was done by an ivory worker in the old city of Indore.

The Dragoon, serial number 417, also has the carved ivory grips with the two likenesses. The old armorer who had been in the service of the last three Maharajas inscribed the back straps, this one being dated 1852, with the same "Maharaja





Yeshwant Rao Holkar". He also engraved this piece and the embellishments were his own idea of Indian decorations and I suppose, to them, the figures appearing there would have a special meaning.

The two Colts have a special meaning to me, not only because of their exceptionally nice condition and history, but also for the successful conclusion of the "chase". It taught me, as a collector, to never despair in my pursuit, but to persist until Lady Luck eventually smiles on me.

