

# Rambling Shots from the Past

Claude E. Fuller

Thank you, Harry\*, and thank you ladies and gentlemen.

When Sam first wrote me about making a talk at this meeting, he gave as his reason the fact that I was probably the oldest member of the Society, and could say something about the early days of collecting guns and relate some of my experiences. Well I pleaded guilty to that first charge, but called his attention to the fact that I was also, without a doubt, the poorest speaker in the entire group, so here I am to prove it; as a matter of fact, I couldn't make a speech if I tried, so with your kind permission I shall just read some of these notes.

Of course, Sam knew that I, having degenerated into just a common old musket collector, could relate little of interest about firearms to this group, and he suggested I confine myself to my early gun collecting experiences, so you will please overlook the seeming super-abundance of "I's" and "Me's" and "My's" that follow.

There has been considerable discussion on just how to insure the success of this young Society of ours, and it appears to me that one of the ways is for each member, when called upon, to get up and do the best he can, which is the only excuse that I have for being here right now.

I have often wondered about this collecting phobia, and have about concluded that it is something like the measles; you are exposed and catch them, and the case is either light or severe depending on circumstances. In my case it was rather severe, for with one outstanding exception—that of collecting "coin of the realm." I have been collecting something or other all of my life.

Starting out like most kids did it was bird eggs and the study of how to collect, preserve and classify them. That collection grew by trading with other collectors, buying a few and etc., until it was rather complete, and in 1916 it was donated to the Oakland Public Museum at Oakland,

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This is a copy of the talk given by Claude E. Fuller after the dinner on Saturday, September 25, 1954, for the Chicago meeting of the American Society of Arms Collectors at the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

The talk was "dittoed" and stapled between blue sheets marked simply "AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ARMS COLLECTORS" over "1954": the statement above is on the first page. There was no *Bulletin* in 1954, but these copies were sent to all members. Thanks to Charter Member Paul Mitchell for keeping this so carefully that it can be reprinted 34 years later!

\*Our First President, Harry C. Knode.

*We regret that we do not have  
a picture of Mr. Fuller.  
There is one on page 3 of  
Bulletin No. 3, Spring, 1961.*

California. On subsequent trips back there I always get a kick out of looking over the display and recalling incidents of how some particular specimens were secured.

Later on it was *Confederate currency and stamps* and the study of the Confederate financial system. That collection finally included a specimen of about every Confederate note issued, most of the bonds and many of the stamps. It was given to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in return for their sponsoring of our book *Confederate currency and stamps*. In addition to the currency, bonds and stamps, this book also covers the coinage, medals and the great seal and flags of the Confederacy. Being just plain danyankees, we were particularly proud that the publication had the endorsement and financial backing of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

These and some of the other hobbies were, you might say, just passing fancies when compared to that of collecting old guns. The bug bit me when the hardware dealer in the town where I was raised gave me an old Plant revolver, and the collection, like most of its kind, took in anything that would shoot, stick or cut, and it grew until it pretty well cluttered up the whole house.

It included pistols, sporting guns, military arms, swords, knives and daggers. Of course most of the pieces were battered up old junk, but that did not detract from their importance; in fact, a good heavy coat of rust and plenty of dents and broken parts was an indication that it was a real relic.

I remember the old hardware store had a battered up, rusty Sharps rifle on display in the window with a big placard reading "PICKED UP ON THE BATTLE FIELD OF TIPPECANOE." I don't recall just how I secured it, nor what it cost, but get it I did. And, after cleaning it up a bit and finding that early patent date of 1848 I knew that I had a prize. The fact that the Battle of Tippecanoe was 37 years before that first patent date was just a mere detail.

I have since come to recognize that old Sharps as probably the most important gun that I ever owned. After

cleaning it up a bit, that is knocking some of the rust off the outside, it was decided to give her a trial. A good heavy charge, rammed home as a muzzle loader, the old cap in place and the target set up every thing was ready. Taking careful aim, the trigger was pulled and BANG went the cap, but that was all. Then, with visions of those Tippecanoe Indians charging in from all sides, it was put on another cap in a hurry. Well, the butt of that gun was just about even with my "bread basket" when the fire from that cap found its way through that dirty crooked passage to the powder charge. When I came to I had learned a lesson that has stuck with me down through the years—ALWAYS TREAT THEM WITH PROPER RESPECT.

It was, I think about 1894 that the Jones Dry Goods Company of Kansas City, one of the early department stores, got in a shipment of old guns and revolvers. That event marked a very important step in my collecting career. Among other things they had Colt Armies, in original holster, with a block of six cartridges at \$2.00 per set. Well, it took a bit of high financing on my part—I was making \$7.50 a week and paying \$4.00 a week board and room—but I managed to raise \$8.00 and bought four of those sets. The guns were in practically new condition, something old, and at the same time something nice to look at, and somehow, the rusty old battered-up pieces lost their charm and my yen for having every piece in the collection as nearly perfect as possible got its start right there.

All my collecting up to this time had been strictly on my own. As far as I knew I was the only gun collector in the country. Then came the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, and like many young couples of the time, we sat up all night on a slow train from Kansas City to St. Louis to spend a week at the Fair.

It was a great Fair—my wife told me—but as far as I was concerned it had only the machinery and transportation exhibits, and of all things a collection of more old guns than I had thought existed. It was the old U.S. Cartridge Company's collection and I spent the balance of the week pestering the attendants at that exhibit, and learned with no little surprise that there were other collectors of old arms.

The catalog of the collection was on sale for a dollar, and this became my text book for years; in fact I have worn out three copies and the fourth one is pretty well gone. Later the 1907 Bannerman catalog came and these two comprised the sum total of all literature on old arms that was available to the ordinary person at that time.

Bannermans was the Bible of the day, but of course the idea of paying the prices he quoted was out of the question—Colt Dragoons at \$10.00 and Colt Armies at \$2.75, even with most of the original finish was just for the rich, as it was easy pickings in those days, every hock shop, second store and hardware place had a few laying around—tops for Colts of all kinds was around a dollar fifty and long

arms 75 cents and up, with an occasional flint lock at 5 or 6 dollars, so even with money as scarce as it was the collection kept growing.

Finally it was decided to concentrate on American Military Shoulder Arms and all of the other material was disposed of. Since a great deal of the pleasure derived from the collecting of old firearms comes from the study of them and the part they played in the overall picture, the military arms afford the best opportunity for research, for if you dig deep enough into the old government records you can generally come up with an answer.

One of the big surprises encountered in first going into the firearm story is the fact that practically all major improvements were made by civilians rather than by military men. Forsyth, the Scottish preacher, developed a gun lock to use a detonating compound that was to end the flint lock that had been in use over two hundred years. Shaw, the artist, put this compound into the copper cap, thus leading to the perfection of the percussion system.

Maynard, the dentist, sold his patent primer to the government for \$75,000, but overlooked, until too late, the fact that he had also solved the problem of a successful breech loader by using a metallic cartridge that would readily expand and contract. Combining the Shaw cap and the Maynard cartridge led to the present day shell, which made possible the development of our modern arms.

Whitney, the cotton gin inventor, who took a contract to manufacture 10,000 muskets for the government, was the first to use mass production methods. And Hall, a boat builder, perfected a system of manufacturing interchangeable gun parts. So to these two men, plus the old guns, the country owes a debt of gratitude as they laid the foundation for the methods of mass production of interchangeable parts that has made this the greatest industrial nation of all time.

Of course there were others who contributed to the many problems, such as Asa Waters, who developed and patented the method of welding gun barrels under the trip hammer which he sold to the government; and Tom Blanchard, the young mechanic, who built the first tack making machines in this country, and then undertook the much harder job of turning a gun stock.

In just a short time he had perfected machines for performing every operation of turning a gun stock. The government paid him a royalty of nine cents for every stock made at the National Armories during the life of the patents, and every lathe in use today for turning irregular shapes is built on that same principal devised by Stammering Tom Blanchard in 1827.

For anyone interested in mechanics, the development of the breech loader offers a study unmatched in any other field. There the inventors all had the same problems; that of making a gas tight breech joint that would work, and the different approaches to the solution of this impossible

problem, by some sixty different inventors affords a most interesting study. Every possible combination was tried, some of which should have worked, but didn't, and others that could not possibly work, but did.

Take, for instance, the Starr carbine and I believe that you will all agree with me that its breech action is as fine a piece of work as can be found in even the most modern guns, but it faded from the picture at the close of the war. On the other hand, take the Sharps action with the Lawrence primer kicking that little wafer out into mid air, unattached to the gun in any way. With the wind blowing or the gun pointed up or down, no one could expect that wafer to get right over the cone just as the hammer reached there, and it could not possibly work, but it did, and was one of the most reliable breech loaders of the Civil War.

Another interesting study is that rusty old Civil War musket that you have been kicking around under your feet for years, as it probably represents the greatest advancement in military weapons in our entire firearm history; such an advancement in fact that it made obsolete, not only the battle tactics, but much of the training of the line officers of only fifteen years before.

Their training and the tactics were based on the arm that had been in service since the very beginning of our country; the old .69 caliber, round ball, smooth bore, flint lock musket that required around two minutes for a well trained soldier to load, and he wouldn't expect to hit anything at a greater range than two hundred yards.

With the adoption of the Model 1855 rifled musket, which was essentially the regulation arm of the Civil War, the infantry soldier for the first time had an arm good for around a thousand yards; and as one author recently wrote, "It is a matter of record that Gordan's Georgia and Alabama infantry, on the first day at Gettysburg, advanced firing better than four shots per minute for several minutes."

Little wonder that not only the infantry but the artillery and cavalry tactics had to be revamped as the war progressed, but too late to prevent some of the most terrible battle casualties in all history.

Today we think of tanks and planes and high powered shells, but do not forget that at Sharpsburg, on September 17, 1862, in just a few hours of fighting, more American boys were killed or wounded than in the first three weeks of the Normandy invasion during the last war.

These are just a few of the many, many interesting cases, each of which would make a story by itself, that add so much to the hobby of collecting old guns, and it is the study of the STORY BEHIND THE GUNS, as much as the guns themselves that will continue to add to the ranks of gun collectors everywhere.

Since there is a bit of Scotch in me, and it's not the kind you are thinking of either, I probably get a bigger kick out of a thrill than the average, and of course gun collect-

ing, like any other hobby, has its thrills and a hunting trip to Brooklyn not so many years ago was sure to produce a spine tingler.

It was over there, in old furniture stores, junk yards and other out of the way places, where they knew nothing about old guns, and cared less, just so they could sell them at most any price, that some of the real prizes turned up, such as the Sharps coffee mill carbine, the Harpers Ferry blunderbuss, the 1840 Musketoon and the Republic of Texas Rifle. Pieces like these, as you probably know, are to the long gun collector, what the Walkers and Patersons are to the Colt collectors. But don't get itchy feet boys, for I pretty well scraped the bottom of that barrel some thirty years ago.

During the 1920's you didn't even have to go to Brooklyn for thrills as the old Walpole Galleries could be depended upon to furnish a few. That was before we had a gun collectors association in almost every state, so the Walpole auctions provided a "get together" that would rival many of the present day meetings.

There you could depend upon seeing, among many others, such old timers as Bill Lawrence, Pop Ingalls, Fred Hines, Harry Harmon and Jim Pratt. And what good times we had, both before the sale, during the sale, and best of all the post-mortems after the sale.

I doubt very much that there is a worthwhile collection of guns in the country today that does not contain specimens from the collection of some of those fellows. Since I or my wife Zenada managed to attend about all of those sales, I have a complete file of the catalogs, most of them with the prices and the name of the buyers. I prize these more than any gun book in the library, as an evening spent thumbing through them, and recalling the many good times we had, is another of those extra dividends that Herman referred to in his wonderful talk at our last meeting.

In addition to the Walpole auctions there were, of course, other auction sales of old arms but they were rather high brow, and the place to go for real thrills was the auction sales of old household goods held over in Brooklyn. One Sunday afternoon we passed one of those places, and in the window was a gun that I wanted.

Since I had to be out of town that week, I gave Zenada \$75.00 to get that gun, and believe me, \$75.00 was a whale of a price to pay for any gun at that time.

Well, she went over there the day of the sale, and after bidding on a couple pieces of china while waiting for the guns to come up, was dismayed to learn that the gun we wanted was in a parcel of five to be sold as one lot. Nothing daunted her however. She started it off in good old Walpole style at a dollar. The "plant" in the rear raised it a dollar, and so on, but the Walpole technique was too much for them and they knocked the lot down to her for \$7.00.

I have often wondered what kind of a fit that old auctioneer would have thrown had he learned that there was

\$75.00 waiting there for just one of those guns.

There is something of a sequel to the thrill that we got out of that sale. A relative of my wife was in New York at the time and had with him his son of about twelve. When they visited our apartment one evening about the second thing that boy said was "Daddy why can't we have a gun collection?", so I started him out with a couple of guns from that sale. Today that boy is the daddy of five children, is a member of the Houston Gun Collectors and the Texas Gun Collectors; is a real student of old arms and has a collection that includes some mighty nice pieces. So a new collector got his start all because that old auctioneer knew more about old furniture than he did about old guns.

I have always considered the little money spent on the collections as the best investment ever made. Back in the hectic days of the early 30's in New York City, when suicides were so numerous they hardly got into the papers at all, I could go home and work on a rusty old gun and completely forget the troubles at the office, and the hours spent digging into old government records were a complete relaxation from all worries.

Zenada joined in all the activities of the hobby. She did a great deal of the research and all of the typing on the four books that we have written on the old guns of the collection, which is one of the reasons that it is now officially carried on the government records as the Claud E. and Zenada O. Fuller Collection of American Military Shoulder Arms.

As you all probably know, we some time ago donated our collection to the U.S. Government, and after about six years of working out the details the National Park Service, under whose jurisdiction it comes, have erected a museum building to house it at the Chickamauga-Chattanooga National Military Park. This, I believe, marks the first time that a museum building has been erected just to house a single collection of old guns. There is to be nothing added nor taken from the collection as it now stands.

With an appropriation of ample funds allotted to the project they have put up a really fine building. Fireproof, air-conditioned and properly lighted. The Remington-Rand cases are the last word in museum cases, as they are practically air tight and individually lighted. With but two exceptions, every gun in the collection is in shooting order, and has been restored, as nearly as possible, to its condition when new. And to me, of most importance, an effort has been made to see that every gun is properly labeled, and every label can be easily read.

I am proud of the part I have had in making possible this exhibit, and some how feel that any real collector of old guns, as he goes through that museum, will feel just a bit of pride in himself as one who is also doing his part to preserve this important phase of our history that just a few years ago was at the vanishing point.

The installation is not quite complete as yet, but we

expect soon to have facilities for those who desire to make a detailed study of the various arms and their intimate connection with the history of our country, and in some cases, perhaps lead to a deeper appreciation of the many heroic deeds and terrible sacrifices of the past that have secured for us the many freedoms we now enjoy. And, at the same time, give to the old guns their proper place in the story; a part that the historians of the past have so sadly neglected to do.

I was particularly glad that Chicago was selected for this meeting of ours, as it brings back many memories. In my knocking around the country I have lived and worked here a number of times, but the most vivid recollections are of those when I was just a little kid peddling newspapers on the streets of this town—and town it was in those days.

The only street lights in our part of town were those big square affairs with a coal oil lamp that always was smoking. The only transportation to down town, where one could see gas lights, was the old horse car line. The neighborhood grocery store always had draft beer on tap and you could get a gallon pail filled for a nickel.

Every block or two had the old familiar livery stable. With the first snow of the season the delivery wagons all had the wheels removed and replaced with sled runners, and we kids started rolling snowballs for the bobsled hill over on the circus lot.

Yes, there have been a lot of changes since then but a good real estate operator or Chamber of Commerce booster could have foretold most of them; but who at that time could foresee the tremendous growth of this gun collecting hobby. And now with this Society of ours, and the many other gun collectors associations all with their sights set for even a higher plane of honest dealings, sincere integrity and good fellowship together, there can be no doubt that the next twenty-five years will far surpass those of the past.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your patience in sitting through this rambling of mine. You have been most gracious and I want you to know that I appreciate it very much. Thank You.

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The picture on page 46: From the left around the table (men only): Andy Palmer, John I. Moore, Wm. R. Funderburg, Lee Petrov, P. Mitchell, Col. R.C. Kuhn, Jim Somers, ??, Bud Roddy, Lew Hutchinson, Red Jackson, John Moran, J.C. Schneberger; George Missbach, Jim White. In the far right background, Thomas T. Hoopes, Lewis Winant, Herschel Logan.

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