

Figure 1. Bottom of breechblock showing the serial number 46.

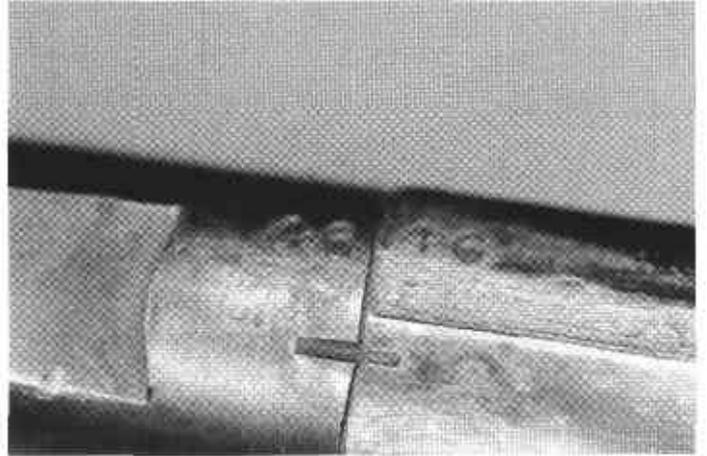


Figure 3. Bottom of barrel and receiver junction showing the register mark and matching serial numbers.

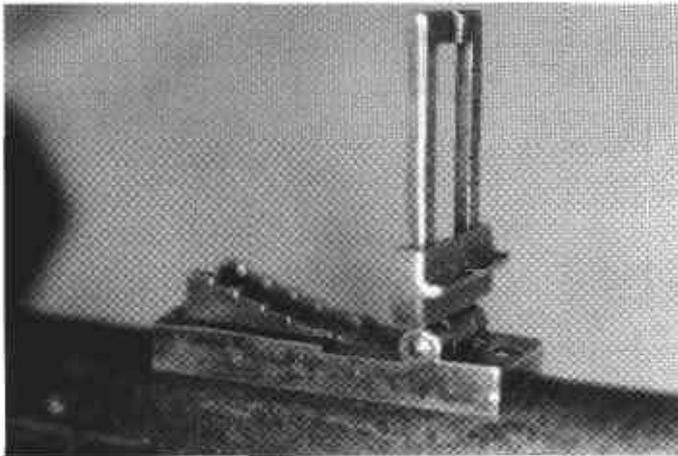


Figure 2. Top of barrel showing the Barnes-type rear sight.

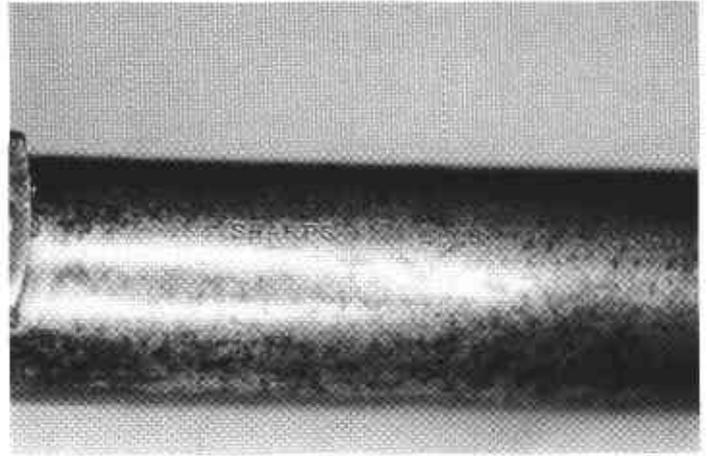


Figure 4. Top of barrel showing the Sharps marking.

The Rarest Sharps

Frank M. Sellers

Why, you ask, is the title of this talk “The Rarest Sharps” when the only gun you see up here is obviously not a Sharps but a Springfield trapdoor?

When Bruce called a couple of weeks ago to remind me that I was at the top of the list for emergency speakers and asked me what the title of my talk was, I had to tell him I didn’t know but that I would come up with something. It was not that I didn’t know what I was going to talk about, but what I was going to call it.

Our story, as far as the Sharps Rifle Company is concerned, begins in 1875. For more than 25 years the Sharps company had been making the same gun, first as a percussion gun before and during the Civil War and later as a cartridge gun.

Edwin G. Westcott, president of the newly reorganized company in 1875, decided that some changes needed to be made, both in the product and in the operation of the factory. To this end, he interviewed a number of New England engineers and inventors.

Undoubtably the most prominent of the men interviewed by Westcott was Nelson King, who had been superintendent of the Winchester Repeating Arms Co. of New Haven, Connecticut, and who held several patents on guns and the machinery used to make them.

In his formal application for the position at Sharps, King claimed “. . . there is no difficulty in putting in a central lock and making one of the most desirable guns in the world and, at the same time, it would be the same old Sharps gun.”¹ King was hired 18 March 1875.

King evidently had given some thought to the idea of a “central lock” Sharps, because it was only a matter of weeks before a prototype of the proposed new action was being shown to dealers and prospective customers. From the company’s point of view, there were several problems with the new action. The company had envisioned a “central lock” to be more on the order of a central *hammer* similar, perhaps, to the Winchester with which King had been associated. While the internal lock parts of the new design were “central,” the hammer was still mounted on the right side of the gun. The safety mechanism, mounted in a cylinder around the other operating parts of the lock, was fragile, and the machinery required to make the new action on a production basis was more complicated and expensive than



was already being used to make the “old” Model 1874 rifles. This machinery, therefore, would not have met one of the prime requirements of Westcott, which was to reduce the cost of producing the guns made. The projected cost of the new gun, more than twice that of the old one, and the projected sales of a more expensive gun in a market already glutted with cheap surplus weapons from the Civil War, were such as to make the new design impractical. Only the few prototypes were made for demonstration to customers and for exhibition at the Centennial World’s Fair in Philadelphia in 1876. Several Sharps dealers and customers saw the new action at the Fair and wrote, asking about availability. The reply to major western dealer J. P. Lower was typical: “. . . The new rifle you saw at ‘the Centennial’ will not be made at present.”²

King stubbornly insisted that his design was good and that it should be put into production. This, along with other problems with King’s management of the factory, led to his downfall. On June 1, 1876, Hugo Borchardt replaced him as superintendent of the factory.

Borchardt had been the runner-up in the competition for the position a year earlier and probably felt that he should have been given the job then. He also had an idea for an improvement to the Sharps action. His design was cleaner, stronger, cheaper, and easier to make than King’s design. It could also be made on the machinery already in use in the factory. Again, it was only a matter of weeks before prototypes of the new design were being shown. The patent on the design was granted by the U.S. Patent Office 26 December 1876, and the rights to it were assigned to the company.

This new design, later to be called the Model 1878 by the company and known by most collectors today by the name of its inventor, was thought at the time to be the salvation of the company, which had fallen on hard times in the depression of the late 1870s. The company thought that there would be a large demand for military guns of the new, more streamlined model, but it was not until August 1877 that they received their first contract. This trial order, for 300 military rifles from the government of China, was supposed to lead to a much larger contract if the first guns proved satisfactory.

More than a year later, on 3 October 1878, the second contract for the new model military rifles came from the State of Michigan. This contract, for 1,300 rifles, had several interesting provisions: one, the Adjutant General of Michigan, J. S. Barnes, who was in charge of ordering the rifles, fancied himself as a gun designer and wanted a few changes made to the gun; two, the company had to take in partial payment for the order all of the obsolete Springfield rifles belonging to the state; three, they also had to take the ammunition for the obsolete guns; four, no cash payments would be made by Michigan until all of the credit from the traded items was used up. This left the company in the unenviable position of having to finance not only the costs of changes made to machinery as a result of the contract but also the material and labor for the new rifles being made.

Among the features that General Barnes did not like on the new rifle, and the only one that found its way into the final contract, was the use of the old Lawrence patent sight, which had been in use since 1859. Barnes's design was more compact and sturdier from a military standpoint than Lawrence's and was sometimes used on other military contract rifles.

This leads us, finally, to the subject of our talk today. (It also suggests two of my alternate titles "A Bad Trade" and "The Straw that Broke. . .") The question arises: What did the Sharps Rifle Co. do with the obsolete trapdoor rifles they took in trade from the State of Michigan? They are mentioned only in passing in my book, and the factory records are not clear on the subject. Some were sold to others, mainly Schuyler, Hartley & Graham, but many remain unaccounted for. From company correspondence we learn something about the state of the company and the traded guns. Hugo Borchardt and company secretary Charles H. Pond took a boat for Europe on 10 May 1879 to try to drum up business, both for the Model 1878 Borchardt rifles and for the remaining obsolete trapdoors. Company president Arthur S. Winchester wrote to Pond, ". . . As usual we have not a cent in the bank. Not fifty dollars have come in since you left. Hartley

backed out on the .50 Cal. Ctgs (from the State of Michigan on the rifle trade) and left the Co. in bad shape as Mich. wants the rifles right away. . . ."3 The trip was unsuccessful, because most of the demand for guns had already been met with surplus from the Civil War.

In the Rock Island Auction Co. catalogue for its sale of April 1997 was a lot that read

LOT 3145

Springfield Trapdoor Converted Sporting Rifle with Sharps Barrel—Serial no. 46, .45/70 cal, 32 inch round bbl, blued finish, walnut stock. Has Sharps Bridgeport marked barrel. No serial number on tang. No. 46 on bottom of breechblock. No stock cartouche—missing ramrod. U.S. Springfield lock is not dated. 1000 yd. graduated Sharps ladder rear barrel sights. A very interesting western gun that bares [sic] research. CONDITION: In very good condition. All metal surfaces turned dark gray with patches of dark brown rust spots. Sharps barrel markings are very sharp. Triggerguard has been reblued. Stock is in very fine condition showing only minor handling marks, mechanically tight. Bore is dirty, may clean up fine. Estimate: 1000-1500"

This item intrigued me. As many of you know, I do much of the cataloguing for these auctions. This particular item had come in after I had finished my part of the catalogue and I had not seen it. It was obvious from the photograph in the catalogue that the sight was one of the Barnes pattern sights and, from the description, I thought that it was probably a gun that someone had screwed a Sharps Model 1878 barrel onto. Because the threads of the Sharps and the Springfield are different, such an installation would require one or the other to be modified. There are several methods by which this could be done. Probably the easiest would be to remove the threaded portion of the barrel and to cut new threads to match the Springfield action. This obviously was not done, because the barrel remained the correct length for Sharps. Various methods of sleeving could have been used, but they would be easy to detect on examination of the gun. After examining the gun during the auction preview, I could find no signs of sleeving or any other alteration of either the barrel or the receiver. This indicated to me that the barrel was installed at the Sharps factory, and I decided to buy it.

For many years, we have speculated that the octagon barrel sporting trapdoor rifles that show up occasionally were one result of the trade with the State of Michigan, but there was no proof of it, because none of these are marked or have any features other than the sights that might establish a direct connection with Sharps. Indeed, the fact that they were made on Model 1873 Springfield receivers instead of "obsolete" models would tend to disprove this speculation.

In most respects, our subject rifle appears to be a standard Springfield Model 1870 rifle. The lock, stock, and action are all Model 1870. Only the barrel and rear sight appear to be different, and this is not obvious from a casual glance. The "Model 1870" marking usually found on the breechblock has been removed. The barrel appears to be a standard Sharps Model 1878 barrel, 32½ inches long, .45/70 caliber, rifled with six grooves, right-hand twist, with the breech end of the barrel threaded to fit the Springfield action instead of the Sharps. The Model 1870 Springfield barrel has nearly the same dimensions, and there appears to be no change to the barrel channel in the stock.

The barrel on this rifle has the standard "SHARPS RIFLE CO. BRIDGEPORT, CONN." marking on the top of the barrel between the receiver and the rear sight. No "Old Reliable" marking was used, because this was reserved for the Sharps action. The rear sight is the second-type Barnes sight without the windage adjustment on the base.

The barrel, receiver, and breechblock all carry the serial number 46. These numbers were struck with the same die that was used on the so-called "Meacham conversion" Sharps rifles made by the factory for many dealers during the same period, the late 1870s. As can be seen in the photographs, the numbers on the barrel and receiver are placed at the ends of the register marks used to line up these parts if they are taken apart. This is another indication of factory work.

Why, you may ask, do I call this "The Rarest Sharps?" After all, there must be at least 45 others. Until I saw this one, I had never seen one, and I have been collecting Sharps for 50 years. This is the only new Sharps product to surface since my book came out 20 years ago.

NOTES

1. Letter, King to Westcott, 14 March, 1875. All letters cited are from the original factory records.
2. Westcott to Lower, 26 July 1876.
3. Winchester to Pond, 22 May 1879.