

The Savage Musket

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Arthur W. Savage entered the arms manufacturing field just as the era of black powder weapons was coming to an end. Although the distinctive Savage rifle design was ultimately to make the company a great success, there could be nothing better than a U.S. Military contract to give the fledgling enterprise a solid financial beginning. Thus, more than two years before the Savage Repeating Arms Corporation was officially formed, Arthur Savage introduced his Model 1892 lever-action musket.

A pair of these muskets was submitted to the Ordnance Department (which tested magazine guns) at Governors Island, New York, in July 1891. They bore Ordnance Department numbers 35 and 43. There may have been only a dozen of these muskets made. The 1892 muskets have 30-inch barrels, eight-shot rotary magazines and weigh a little over 10 pounds. Their caliber is 30-40 krag. At the end of the ordnance trials, the Savage musket was rejected, along with 47 other entrants, in favor of the Krag rifle.

In spite of the initial failure at Governors Island, the Savage Arms design of a hammerless, self-contained solid breech construction was to prove a unique and superior rifle action. The original design drawings for the Savage rifle were furnished by Colt. These early linen drawings are on display at the Savage Arms plant in Westfield, Massachusetts. Colt may have helped engineer and build the prototype rifle, which is also on display at Savage. This was not unusual for Colt. It seems they helped Savage and other firearms firms in a similar manner. A nice way to monitor the competition!

There has been speculation that Colt actually built the unmarked Model 1892 muskets. Ron Coburn, president of Savage Arms, and John Callahan, Savage Arms historian, firmly believe that their early guns were built by Marlin. It would not seem logical for Colt to build the 1892 muskets



and then for Savage to switch to Marlin for the 1895 musket. All Model 1895 muskets were built by Marlin.

At the same time the U.S. Government was attempting to replace its single-shot black powder arms with magazine rifles, state governments were doing the same thing. The state of New York was no exception.

An excellent article written by Gilbert E. Newton, titled "New York Militia Rifle Trials of 1896," chronicles Arthur Savage's second attempt at securing a government contract.

An improved Savage musket, Model 1895, was submitted to the New York State Trials. This musket had a 28-inch barrel and featured a more streamlined receiver design. In his article, Mr. Newton mentions that a special receiver may have been built by Pratt and Whitney to take the .30-40 Krag cartridge. After a careful review of the serial number/shipping records at Savage, nothing was found to show that 1895 muskets were made in anything but .303 Savage.

According to research by Savage Arms historian John Callahan, there were 96 muskets and four carbines made to Model 1895 specifications. In all likelihood, all of these guns



Figure 1. Savage model 1892, Savage collection. Courtesy of John Callahan.



Figure 2. Savage Model 1895 musket, serial number 5027, Joe Salter collection.

were made for the New York Trials and, when Savage was again rejected, were shipped to various distributors and sold.

Once again, Arthur Savage lost out, this time in the New York State Trials. According to Mr. Newton's article, the Savage musket was declared the winner unanimously. However, a bitter political battle ensued, brought about by the Winchester Repeating Arms Corporation. They claimed that the trials had been unfairly conducted. Under intense political pressure, New York caved in and agreed to reject the Savage magazine gun and to accept surplus U.S. single-shot muskets at no charge.

The Savage 1895 musket was phased out and the improved Model 1899 musket was introduced in January of that year. The Savage Model 1899 was an improvement over the 1895, primarily in changing from the round bolt lockup to the square bolt lockup.

The Model '99 was Savage's most popular gun throughout the 1900s. As a sporting rifle it was made in nearly 30 different calibers and over a dozen barrel lengths. Two Model 1899 Savage muskets have been discovered. One of them, currently in the Joe Salter collection, is believed to be the one shown in early Savage catalogs. The serial number is in the 58,000 range and, while not identifiable in Savage records, it is most assuredly genuine in all respects. The author believes it is a one-of-a-kind musket. The second 1899 musket is on display at the Savage Arms plant. Although the musket was not available to be photographed, the author had a chance to examine it closely. This 1899 musket has two grooves cut in the bottom of the receiver, similar to those seen on the Model 1892, which is shown in Figure 6. For what purpose these grooves were cut is pure speculation.

The second Model 1899 differs from the one in Figure 5. It has a hand guard which closely resembles that of a

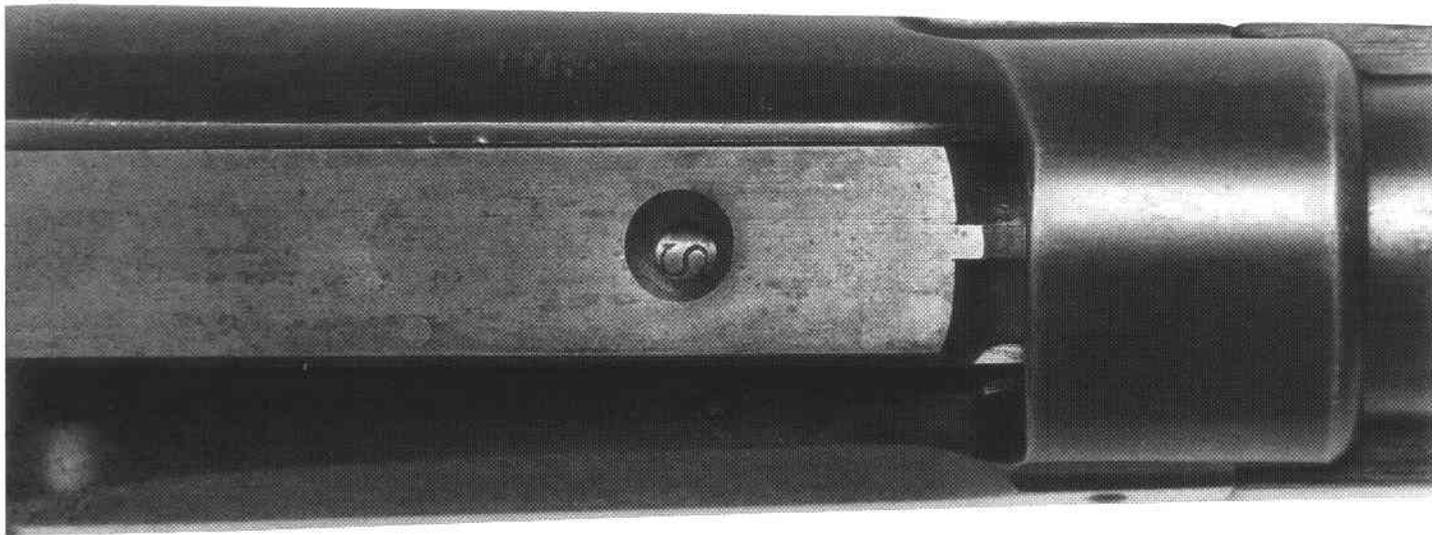


Figure 3. Model 1895, Joe Salter collection.

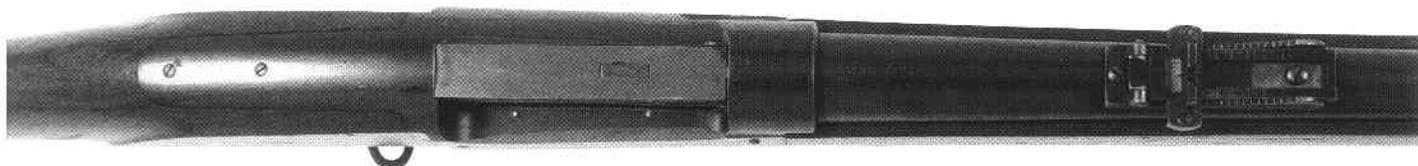


Figure 4. Savage Model 1899, Joe Salter collection.



Figure 5. Savage Model 1899 musket, Joe Salter collection.

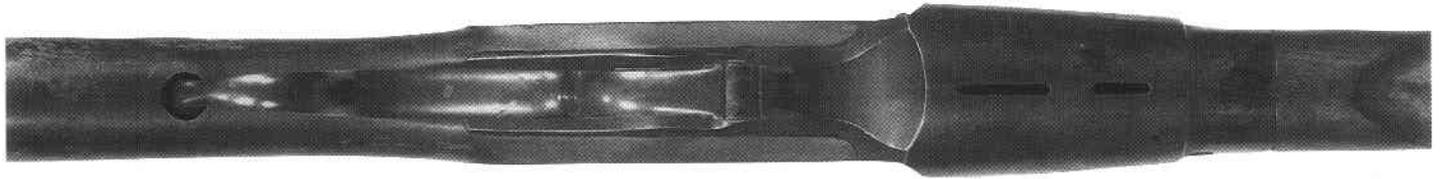


Figure 6. Savage Model 1892 musket, Savage Arms collection. Courtesy of John Callahan.

Winchester-Lee. It has a ladder type rear sight, as opposed to the ramp type of earlier models. A Winchester-Lee style front band finishes off its 28-inch barrel. The caliber is .303 Savage. This musket is believed to be one-of-a-kind and purely experimental.

The only order that Savage received for its musket was not from a national or state government but from the Montreal Home Guard in Canada. As war clouds gathered over Europe in 1914, the gentlemen of Montreal felt the need to defend themselves from a possible German attack. Since Canada's war materials were in short supply, particularly its small arms, the Montreal Home Guard had to look to an outside source for its weapons.

In researching the Canadian Savage musket, the author contacted Eileen Meillon, librarian for the Stewart Museum, Montreal. She provided all the necessary information via period newspaper clippings from the Montreal Gazette. The clippings told the story.

It seems that applications to join the Montreal Home Guard were running at a fevered pitch in 1914 and early 1915. The applications were from men aged 40-70 years who were too old for regular service. They were the well-to-

do, primarily from the elite Westmount section of Montreal. Each member of the guard would eventually pay \$35.00 for his musket, bayonet and uniform. The Quebec Savings and Trust acted as agent for the Montreal Home Guard in their purchase of muskets from Savage Arms.

The Canadian Savage musket seen today was made using a 26-inch sporting rifle barrel rather than the 28-inch barrel of earlier models. These muskets have sling swivels and are equipped to take the rare Savage knife bayonet.

According to which records you believe, somewhere between 800 and 1100 Canadian Savage muskets were shipped to the Montreal Home Guard. Savage shows 803 and the Montreal Gazette says 1000 plus. To be an authentic Canadian Savage musket, the name of the owner must be found stamped into the butt stock or engraved on the receiver. An owner's number or purchase number, such as 174, must be stamped into the butt plate. If the markings are missing, the musket is simply a non-issue gun.

This was the last of the Savage muskets. Interest in the Montreal Home Guard faded in late 1915, and it disappeared as quickly as it had been formed. The Savage muskets were

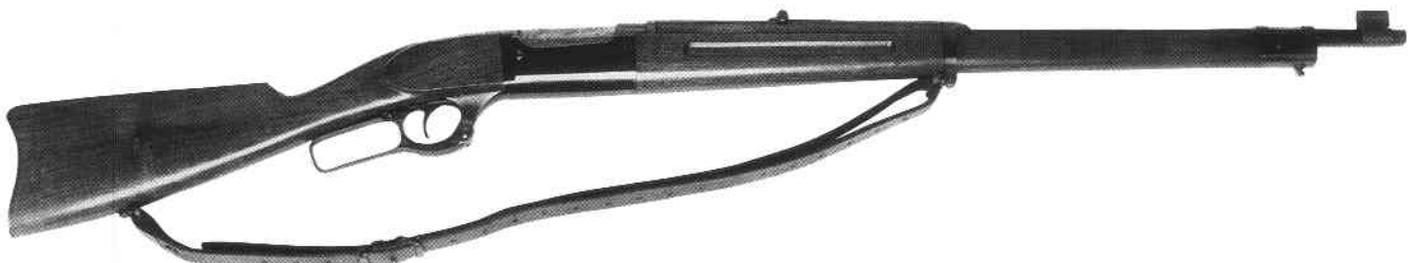


Figure 7. Jim Johnson collection.



Figure 8. Jim Johnson collection.

dispersed among the owners. Many if not most of these guns were sportorized and their bayonets made unrecognizably into knives. Few muskets and even fewer bayonets have survived in their original condition.

It is ironic that while Savage failed in his early attempts to land a government contract with a design of his own, the Savage Arms Corporation became a major supplier of other inventors' designs. In World War I, Savage produced large quantities of Lewis guns. In World War II, Savage produced over 250,000 Thompson submachine guns.

Today, the Savage Arms Corporation is flourishing. Under Ron Coburn, president, Savage continues to turn out a high-quality bolt-action rifle, and a lever-action model may



Figure 9. Jim Johnson collection.

be reintroduced. In spite of all the political and environmental pressures placed on firearms manufacturers, the Savage name is alive and well.

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