

THE FUTURE OF GUN COLLECTING

by LEON C. JACKSON



LEON C. "RED" JACKSON

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

At the outset let me say that this is an assigned subject. When the program for this meeting came out, I learned for the first time that I was to speak and the subject I was to speak about. As some of you know, the time of this discussion has been changed twice and a moment ago, Henry Stewart leaned over to ask me the subject of this discussion. For a minute there, I thought they were going to change the subject too.

I grew up in the little country town of Marion, Alabama where one of our favorite people, Charlie Perry, was the country boy who made good and ultimately became a high official of E. I. duPont de Nemours & Co., Inc. In the depression days of the early 1930's he was the manager of duPont's operations in Birmingham, Alabama which included a large manufacturing plant for dynamite and other explosives. To reduce the danger of an accidental explosion, the chief motive power in that plant consisted of mules. The purchasing department wrote Mr. Charlie that they had information the grain market was going to advance and if that was the case they wanted to order six months supply of mule feed. If it was not, they only wanted to order a 30 day supply. In conclusion they asked him which they should order. Mr. Charlie wrote across the bottom of the letter, in red pencil: "If I knew what the grain market was going to do, I wouldn't be working for you SOB's".

That pretty well expresses my position. If I really knew what the future of this field would be, I would probably be out somewhere trying to do something about it rather than standing here talking about it. In the final analysis I think it is largely a matter of the continual redistribution of large collections, with a few added every year as they are found in private hands; and quite a few subtracted each year, as some are lost to fires and others are entombed in museums.

Actually we only have to study the past to get a reasonably clear idea of where we are going. For in gun collecting, like anything else, history repeats itself. Look at the cycles of the past fifty years and add the few modern ingredients we shall discuss later and the picture is fairly clear. In this country at least, the massive accumulations of arms and armor like the Hearst collection may be coming to an end for the simple reason that excessively high income taxes preclude it. On the other hand, the newly rich of a revitalized Europe are stepping into the void and buying heavily. It would appear from the trend that they are using fine antique arms much as they have always done with paintings and other art objects - as a hedge against inflation.

In the early part of this century, the predominant areas of interest were in Kentucky rifles and fine European Arms. The Kentucky was distinctly American, often beautiful in design and ornamentation and just naturally "went with" fine early American furniture. In the same way fine European arms had a strong artistic appeal for the same reason. But there was another important factor. If one wanted to study old guns and their contribution to history, there was simply nothing available in this country. A limited amount of good material was available in Europe. Further there was little communication between the men who took up this hobby, except in strictly local situations.

With the coming of World War II, several million people suddenly were exposed to arms; had the opportunity to travel; to see museums and meet others with similar interests. Further, money to indulge

these hobbies began to loosen up. Just before the war, there had begun the publication of good, definitive literature on American guns. To name a few "A History of the Colt Revolver"; Arc Gluckman's excellent studies on U. S. Martial arms; the old original "Gun Report"; Chapel's "Gun Collecting" and "Handbook of Values". For the first time, the average person was able to find something reasonably authoritative and might even find it in his home town library. With the end of the war, the flood of information really began, headed by people like Herman Dean, Jim Serven, the Stackpole Co., John Parsons and others. Today we have a gold mine of information readily accessible, which the collector of 30 years ago or longer didn't dream about.

About the same time, there started the great rush to Colts. I once heard a man express the opinion that "the reason there are so many Colt collectors is because that is the only make where enough specimens exist for everybody to have one". There is an element of truth to it but remember that the source of European arms was largely shut off because of the war; the Colt truly had an important place in our history for the past century and more; while again the available literature was probably the best available covering any specialized field.

However along with it, has been a continuing interest in other American specialties, i.e., U.S. Martials; Winchesters, Remingtons, Smith & Wesson; Civil War revolvers; Deringers and others. The cycles of interest seem to vary both periodically and geographically. Frequently we see the influence of a single strong collector in a particular locality, causing many others to follow his lead in a particular specialty.

In the immediate post war period, other influences made themselves felt. First, there was the great growth of the gun show movement, which started in Ohio and has spread all over the nation. Not only have the state and local collector groups led the way but now many shows are commercially promoted. Unquestionably this brought much greater exposure of collectors to their counter-parts elsewhere while at the same time exposing them to an available source of supply. There were adverse results too; the show idea has to some extent been over done. It brought out the trash and junk dealer and the fast buck artist, who had no serious interest as a collector but rather hoped to pick up a few bucks, passing a gun from one table to another. Lately this group seem to be changing their allegiance to coins and I see that as a good thing for gun collecting.

Before we dismiss the influence of literature on the subject, let me point out that printing presses continue to pour out more good books in every area of arms interest. The vastly increased circulation of periodicals like The American Rifleman; the entry of more magazines like Guns, Gun World, Guns & Ammo, Gun Report plus increased attention by general circulation publications can only have one result. They will inevitably reach, interest and stimulate an increasing number of people. We are witnessing too a real population explosion and out of that increase in sheer numbers must come a certain percentage who acquire this interest. The greater ease of travel and communication can only further increase the trend.

Even publication of dealer and auction catalogs have a strong bearing on prices, particular interests and they too reach more and more people.

Basic economics have a tremendous influence. Immediately after World War II, we saw many European collectors and owners selling fine guns to raise money. Today their economies have been revitalized and they are seeking strongly to reacquire the collections they lost. Inflation and deflation of money can have a strong bearing but again if we look at history, fine guns will and always have held their relative value.

As governments over the world change, another influence could develop. Among the Maharajahs of India and Pakistan; the Dons of South America and the ruling classes of other countries there are truly some gigantic collections, virtually unknown to collectors in general. Changing political and economic conditions could bring these on the market. A really large increase in supply might well take some time for the hobby in general to absorb.

Fakes and replicas have had and will continue to have an influence on the hobby. We have always had the faking problem in this field, as well as any other fine art area. The unscrupulous have faked paintings of old masters; counterfeited money. So it is not a new problem but is aggravated as values increase and this class of person is tempted by higher profits. Full scale replicas, with which we are now being flooded, merely give the faker a running start. I think there is a definite need for good muzzle loading shooting arms of modern manufacture. But I also think they should be so designed that they are not a copy of an old and desirable gun and cannot be readily altered and aged to look like one. Further when fakes are discovered, they should be exposed and in some manner taken completely off the market where they can never re-circulate. Our failure to meet this problem can only be a depressing agent on our pleasure and investment.

One specter looms on the horizon which in my view is the most serious of all and that is the very involved question of firearms legislation. Year in and year out we are belabored on all sides with the introduction of bills and ordinances at every level of government, all seeking in one way or another to restrict the lawful ownership and use of firearms. If these things are in any measure successful they may either prohibit ownership or make it so obnoxious that a great many people simply will quit. Should that happen, the market will be dried up; guns will have no value and gun collecting will have no future. Only by eternal vigilance and serious missionary work by gun owners, can the public in general and the legislator in particular be educated to the absolute necessity of freedom in firearms ownership and use in a free and independent nation.

What's good with gun collecting? Throughout our history they have proved to be a good investment. Think back on how many hours of pleasure and relaxation they have afforded you. Then look around you in this room. How many of the really good friends you see here would you even know if it were not for this common bond and interest in old guns? Can there be a greater dividend than such friends as these?

If we maintain high standards of ethics in our dealings; discretion in our transactions; and constant defenses against legislative encroachment, I can see only one future to this avocation and hobby, i.e., a bright, enjoyable and successful one for us, for the next and for future generations.



President Stewart Presents
Award to Gene Miller



Meade C. Patterson of
Hyattsville, MD. trying to buy a
Duck from Norris E. Pratt
of Kemblesville, Penna.



Doc Lucie Taking a Picture
of Editor Knode Taking
a Picture of Doc Lucie Taking
a Picture of Editor Knode
taking a picture etc.