

Civil War Cavalry: Arms, Accoutrements, and Relics

by: Bill Moore, Jr.

This treatise will allow a brief insight into the legend of the Civil War cavalryman, the weapons he used and the artifacts he left behind.

The history of the military equestrian goes far back to the dawn of civilization. Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar relied heavily upon the support of their legions of horsemen to conquer the ancient world. Hannibal of Carthage astonished the Romans with his cavalry of elephants.

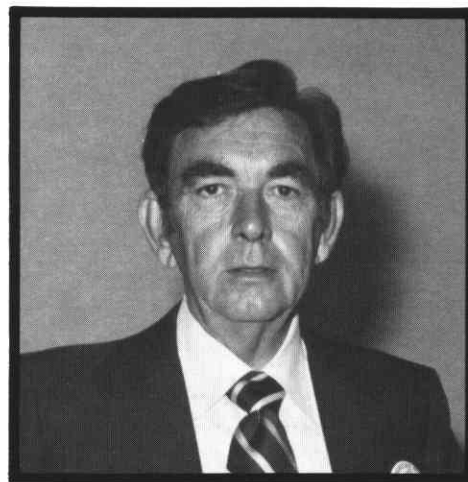
Throughout the following centuries the horse soldiers slowly evolved from men who hurled stones and spears and wielded bows and arrows from the backs of horses or elephants. In the Civil War era, the horse soldier reached the pinnacle of perfection with flashing steel sabers and fast-repeating carbines. Then came mechanized cavalry in the form of swiftly moving tanks, trucks and motorcycles, virtually replacing the mounted soldier — as in the case of Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel's once-proud Afrika Korps. And then the sophisticated Air Cavalry emerged. The invention of the helicopter eliminated the need for horse cavalry forever.

Down through the ages military leaders had depended on the swift movements of the horse soldier to gather intelligence, secure flanks and turn the flanks of adversaries.

It took the Civil War to force the cavalry into a mature and functional arm of the military. At the outbreak of hostilities, neither side possessed much in the way of cavalry. The South was quick to realize the strategic value of cavalry, while the North took as much as two years longer. The situation is reminiscent of the status of the U.S. Air Corps at the beginning of World War II. In this case, the Japanese realized the importance of the airplane as an instrument of war long before any other country, so naturally Japan dominated the sky for two whole years.

In the beginning months of the American Civil War the Union cavalry was used cautiously, while Rebel horsemen rode rough-shod over the Yankees. One of the main reasons for the Southern cavalry's superiority was the fact that more of the fighting took place in the South, where Confederate horsemen were naturally more familiar with the terrain. They were fighting in their own back yards, defending their homes and personal property. Also, their native population assisted them in every way possible.

Another reason for Confederate superiority was the fact that many Southerners were aristocrats, bred in the gentlemanly traditions of horsemanship. Even the children had a natural affinity for riding. It was easier for them to adapt to the rigors of mounted warfare than for the city-bred laborers and store keepers of the North. Moreover, the bulk of purebred horses came from the Southland, which gave the Confederates the edge on procuring quality stock.



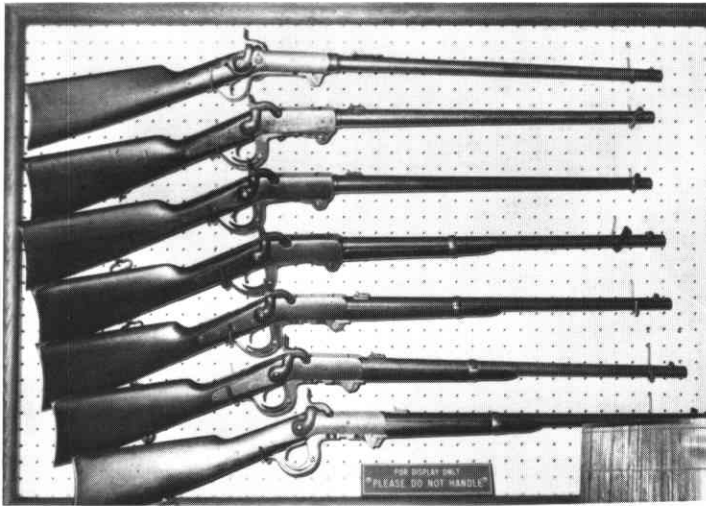
Then too, because the South lacked the good highways of the North, the populace learned at an early age to manipulate horses. Conversely, the Northerners rode wagons and surreys everywhere they traveled. The exception among Northerners was the hardy farm boys from Indiana, Illinois and Iowa: the people of these rural regions had also learned to depend on horseback riding, and this stock would form the backbone of the U.S. Cavalry.

As mentioned earlier, it took the Union Cavalry two years to mature into seasoned troopers. During this time, the Yankee infantryman held a low opinion of his mounted comrade-in-arms. The common saying was: "Nobody ever saw a dead cavalryman! If you want to have fun, jine the cavalree!" All branches of the military treated them as second-class soldiers. Many commanders used them as scouts, couriers, pickets and skirmishers for the infantry in the first years.

The original purpose in creating the cavalry was for reconnaissance and minor raiding operations. Occasionally, opposing horsemen clashed in the full shock of battle.

Credit goes to U.S. Major Gen. Joseph Hooker for forming the first full-scale cavalry corps — 12,000 strong — and completely separating it from the jurisdiction of the other corps leaders. It was comparable in size to the largest infantry army. Hooker's efforts and success created an entirely new and respectable image for the cavalry and did wonders for the morale of the trooper.

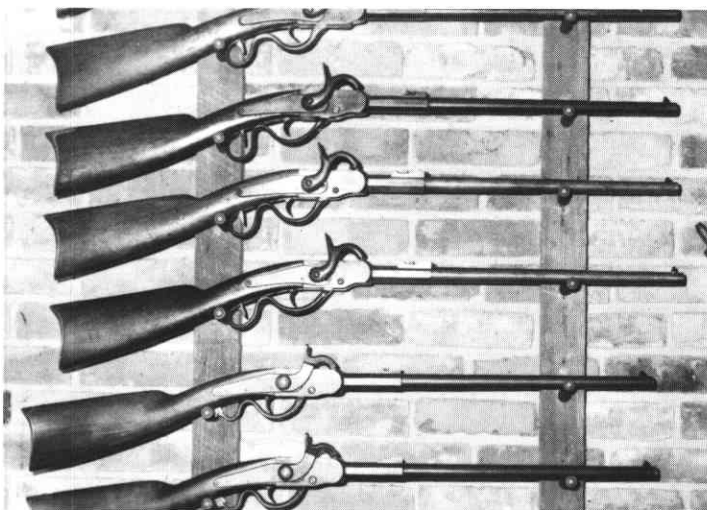
At first there were no strict regulations applying to personal baggage, and horses frequently were laden to the breaking point. In *Grierson's Raid*, D. Alexander Brown quotes an Iowan veteran who, somewhat humorously, aptly describes a latter-day Don Quixote: "Fully equipped for the field, the green cavalryman was a fearful and wonderful object. Mounted upon his charger, in the midst of all the paraphernalia and adornments of war, a moving ar-



1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and Transition Model Burnsidés.



Merrill carbines.



Gwyn & Campbells.

senal and military depot, he must have struck surprise if not terror, into the minds of his enemies. When he was on foot, he moved with a great clapping and clanking of his arms and accoutrements, and so constrained by the many bands crossing his body that any rapid motion was absurdly impossible. When the rider was in the saddle, begirt with all his magazine, it was easy to imagine him protected from any ordinary assault. His properties rose before and behind him like fortifications, and those strung over his shoulders covered well his flanks. To the uninitiated it was a mystery how the rider got into the saddle, how he could rise to a sufficient height and how then descend upon the seat was the problem. The irreverent infantry said it was done with the aid of a derrick, or by first climbing to the top of a high fence or the fork of a tree.

That's the spectacle the early cavalryman presented. However, it did not take him very long to learn what constituted essential equipment for traveling, fighting and subsistence. Excess baggage, armored vests, and extra rope were the first things to be discarded, and blankets were reduced from two to one — and shared by two. They learned to pack a horse so lightly that it became a fine art. The carbine was the heaviest part of the load. On his famous 600-mile ride from LaGrange, Tennessee, to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Col. Grierson's equipment consisted only of a pocket map, small compass, and a jews-harp.

The epaulet, or shoulder scales, was the first part of a uniform to be discarded. Originally designed as a functional armor plate to protect shoulders from saber slashes, the epaulet was quickly removed, not only because the shiny brass would betray his movements but also because it marked the trooper as a rookie.

The cavalry forces on both sides soon graduated from the role of scouts and messengers to that of hardened saddle warriors participating in wild whirlwind raids culminating in hand-to-hand battles punctuated by the metallic ring of clashing sabers and the whinnying of frightened horses.



1851, 1852, 1853, and 1855 British model Sharps.

Cavalry raids, except in a few cases, were of short duration. Attacking groups struck quickly and unexpectedly, cutting up the enemy as much as possible, and then disappearing. Their primary function now was to inflict the maximum damage to enemy resources in minimal time, and to act as "walkie-talkies" by relaying valuable intelligence pertaining to enemy position and plans. The saber and revolver were the mainstay of the early cavalryman. The long, straight, 1840 Prussian-type saber was common in 1861. An awkward weapon, this straight version sword was later replaced with the light, curved American blade designed for "cut and thrust" fighting. As the war progressed, the value of the saber as a suitable weapon became a controversial topic among cavalrymen. It soon became a joke among horse soldiers that their sabers had lopped off more of their own horses' ears than enemy heads. The saber, however, always remained the hardest of all weapons to face, because the enemy could see it coming!

There were several carbines in use long before the Civil War. Actually, the first breechloading percussion carbine used by the United States was the Model 1633 Hall-North, an invention of John H. Hall. They were widely used by the U.S. Dragoons to fight the frontier Indians. However, due to its many imperfections, use of the Hall was fizzling out before the Civil War began.

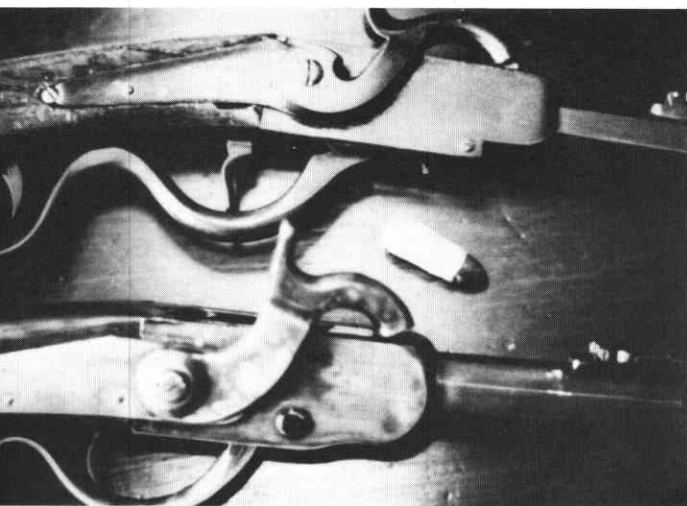
After two years of war, the breechloading carbine made its debut into the annals of Civil War history. The carbine made one man equal to six men with muzzle-loading guns. Later, when the Spencer repeating carbines were issued, some Eastern regiments abandoned the sword altogether. The successful evolution of the breechloader carbine depended on a comparable improvement in the design of cartridges. The only problem was that each gun manufacturer designed his own unique cartridge. There was a gross lack of uniformity, and no attempts were made to standardize. The early cartridges had been fashioned from waterproof linen or paper treated with nitrate, in order



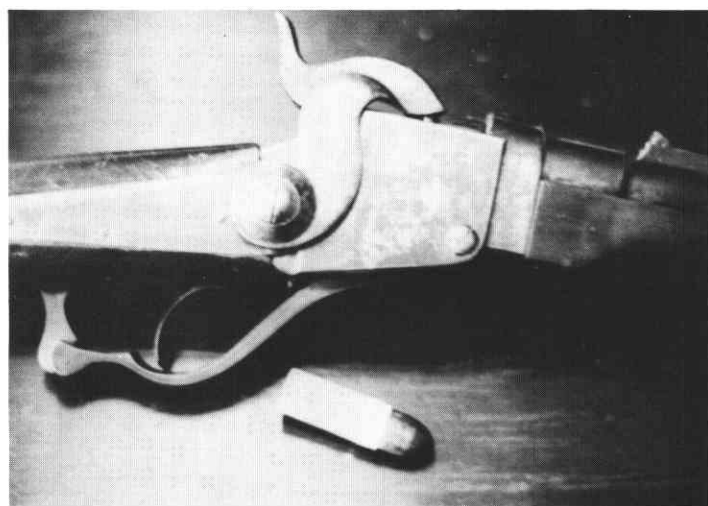
First model Maynard, tape primer and cartridges.



Close-up of first model Burnside.



Top: Cosmopolitan; bottom, Gwyn & Campbell.



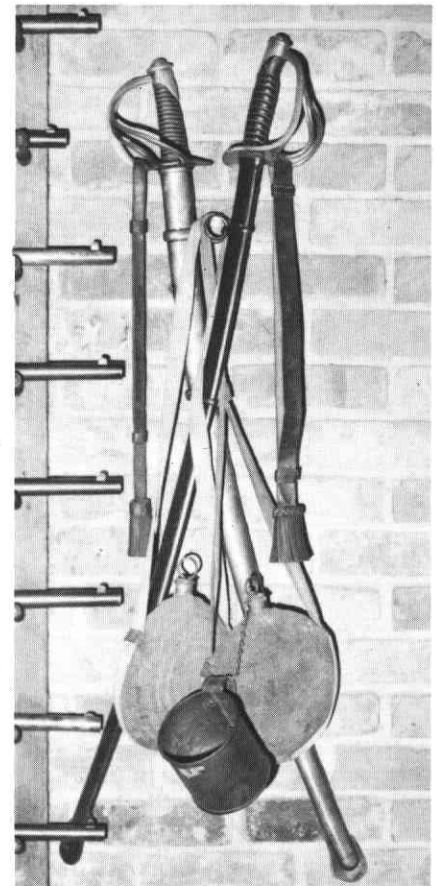
Starr carbine.



Figure 1.



Top three are Springfields: 1847, 1855 alteration, and 1855 model.
Bottom 9 are Merrill variations.



Cavalry sabers, canteens, and cup.

to effect complete disintegration upon blast. Then came patents for self-contained metallic cartridges. These shells were filled with powder, then plugged with a conical bullet, and had a primer within the shell. Now the breech loader had attained perfection.

Another valuable adjunct to the success of the carbine was the invention of the tape primer. They consisted of 25 primer pellets stuck to a thin, strong, very narrow tape glued over, then varnished to make them waterproof. These came in rolls similar to those used in toy cap pistols today. Original percussion caps were so tiny that they were difficult to grip by cold, clumsy, or trembling fingers.

Most of the revolvers used by both sides were Colt models. Some of the Dragoon outfits retained the still popular bulky Model 1848. Shown in Fig. 1 is a Third Model Hartford Dragoon revolver, serial no. 17666, cut for shoulder stock, dug from the Port Hudson Battlefield. The feature that distinguishes this model from the other early models is the round-back trigger guard.

One Union volunteer regiment, the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry (Rush's Lancers), reminiscent of the days of Norman knights, was armed with lances. Although the unit was armed with pistols and a back-up unit of 12 carbines, it soon discarded the cumbersome lances for carbines because the lances were unsuited for use in heavily-wooded battle grounds. Incidentally, it was U.S. Gen. McClellan who initiated the use of the lance, thus giving him credit

or two significant contributions, the other being the famous saddle he designed.

The carbine has been called the purest of all martial firearms, being the only weapon produced solely for military use. With an average effective range of 150 yards, its small size made it the ideal gun for a fast-riding man on horseback to use in close fighting. It was easy to manipulate, light to carry, and sturdy.

When the Civil War ended, the Burnside carbine was rated third in popularity. Manufactured in Bristol, Rhode Island, by inventor Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside in 1856, it subsequently evolved through four basic models until the fourth model of 1864. Its popularity was attributable to its simplicity of design, durability, and waterproof cartridge, though the high price of sheet brass made it difficult to produce the ice-cream-cone-shaped cartridge cases. Eventually, this high cost would be the nemesis of Burnside carbines, even though its brass cases could be used over and over again, perhaps as many as 100 times. Stacks of these thin brass cases still stuck together have been dug up on many battlefields, as shown in Fig. 2.

The first Model Burnside came out in 1856, and its first cartridges were wrapped in foil. This was followed by the machine-made brass cases with the small hole in the base to allow the spark to ignite the powder.

Exact production figures on this first model Burnside vary, but not more than several hundred are thought to



Figure 2.



Model 1855 pistol-carbine.



Full regulation cavalryman with Spencer.

have been made. One thing for sure, they are extremely hard to come by today. It took many years of traveling and fruitless searching before one was added to the Bill Moore collection. A dug specimen of this first model was excavated at Fort Donaldson and is shown in Fig. 3.

The Burnside improved quickly. The Second Model Burnside of 1862 did away with the hardly-visible Maynard straight-line tape primer and side lever. The locking latch was also redesigned, as well as the improvement of the cone-shaped cartridge mentioned earlier; the latch was improved by G. P. Foster in 1860.

Because the First and Second Models had no wood, the Third Model is easy to identify by its wooden forestock.

The last Burnside — and the most produced of all — was the Fourth Model. It had a hinged, double-pivoting breechlock with breechlock pin for easy dismantling. With a production rate nearly 3,000 monthly, it's no wonder there are more of these in "like new" existence today.

The first significant use of repeating carbines took place at Hoover's Gap, Tennessee, when Col. John T. Wilder's men totally wiped out a superior force of Confederates. It was a story which would be repeated over and over again — Confederates, believing they were charging against the muzzleloaders they carried, were mowed down long before their own guns were in range.

The single-shot Sharps were widely distributed among Federal horsemen in 1861. Being breechloaders, and easy to manage made them the leading single-shot breechloader of the war. The Sharp's only drawbacks were the paper or linen cartridges and percussion caps. They had to be recharged for each firing and produced too much smoke when fired. Their effectiveness in inclement weather was reduced to zero. However, in spite of these handicaps, many men boasted how their Sharps could drop a man half-a-mile away.

The slanting breech model took linen cartridges. They won notoriety in the famous Kansas Territory slavery fight: a load of these brand new Sharps carbines was discovered in a shipment of crates being hauled to abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, a hard-shell preacher, in Kansas. The gun crates were stamped "Bibles" — and the name "Beecher Bibles" stuck.

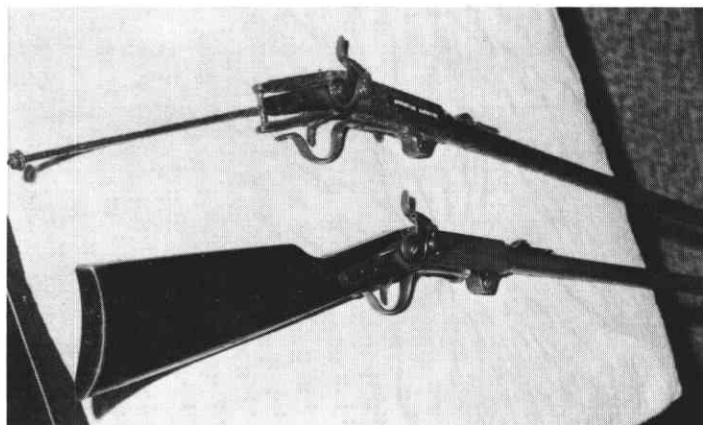


Figure 3.

Two nearly identical models were used during the war — the "New Model 1859" and "New Model 1863." Both were fired as a single shot with a percussion cap or with a tube of water-proof primer pellets. The New Model 1863 is best distinguished by its vertical breech block. Shown in Fig. 4 are both models. The top one was dug from the Wilderness, showing physical evidence of having been subjected to the intensive heat from one of the fires which ravaged the battlefield during the fighting. Once used in the Battle of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the lower relic was plowed up about 1900. Because of its early discovery, this vertical breech model still retains its original stock, and although it is weather-beaten and shaken, the other side of the stock shows a very distinct groove. Produced by extensive rubbing against the saddle, this groove is a silent battle scar incurred from many campaigns.

With the invention of the Spencer — proclaimed as the most extraordinary of all Civil War firearms — the Sharps began to gradually fade out. Colt revolving carbines and Henry's were also coming out at this time, and the government was busy issuing these highly efficient repeating arms.

The Spencer was the most famous and favored of all Civil War carbines. It had a tubular magazine in the stock with a capacity for seven metallic cartridges. The Spencer's ability to fire off seven quick shots, and its simplicity of operation made for an unbeatable combination. Rebel soldiers complained that the Yankees loaded their repeaters on Sunday and shot them all week. The Navy was first to purchase any sizable number of Spencers, ordering 700, and then the Army followed up with an order of 10,000. President Abraham Lincoln personally test-fired the Spencer, and was so impressed that he insisted that they be immediately furnished to his troops. They were extensively used in the battle of Gettysburg by the famous "Iron Brigade" and also by Gen. Custer's Michigan Cavalry.

Another short-lived weapon was the Colt Model 1855 revolving cylinder carbine — which resembled a long pistol with a stock. This arm was not only impractical, but also expensive and dangerous. When fired, it sometimes discharged its entire cylinder, often resulting in the loss of



Figure 4.

a hand. Many state units purchased their own Colt carbines as personal arms, especially the officers. Some which had been purchased in 1859 for the cavalry were used during the war. Fig. 5 shows a Colt carbine, probably carried by one of Grierson's Raiders, and, over a century later, excavated at Port Hudson.

Another unusual carbine was the Cosmopolitan. This weapon has known many names: Union, Gross, Gwyn and Campbell, and Cosmopolitan. It took its first name "Union" because of the war; "Gross" after its inventor, Henry Gross; "Gwyn and Campbell" for its later developers. It was also called the "Ohio" for the state of manufacture, and "Grapevine" because of its serpentine shaped hammer and trigger guard. The main problem with this piece was its scarcity of ammunition. Grierson's cavalry was partially armed with the Cosmopolitan, but ran out of cartridges before reaching the end of their 600 mile run. Fig. 6 shows one such carbine which made that famous Grierson raid and was recently excavated at Port Hudson.

According to a vast amount of researching, the Maynard Carbine was far superior to all other small arms, mainly because of its light weight (six pounds) and accuracy. Designed by Dr. Edward Maynard, who also invented the waterproof roll of tape primers, the Maynard was quite popular in the war, 20,202 having been purchased by the North.

Double-barreled shotguns were quite popular in Confederate cavalry units. Many parts to these old muzzle-loaders have been excavated from Rebel campsites and trenches, along with cavalry buttons, bridle bits, spurs, rosettes and minie balls. Shown in Fig. 7 is one such double-barrel relic dug from a cavalry campsite at Port Hudson. This relic probably carries a grim tale, its left breech having burst so close to its user's face.

By the end of the war, there were 44 different breech-loading carbines, too numerous to cover here.

There was the general opinion held by the infantrymen and civilian population that the Civil War cavalryman was a privileged, exalted and aristocratic individual fighting a conflict in sublime fashion, free of the mundane annoyance and hardships that fell to the lot of the foot soldier.

It was the same false generalization believed by ground soldiers regarding pilots during World War I and II.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Because of the speed and mobility of the mounted soldier, he was forced to work that much harder. It was expected of him. Unlike the foot soldier who had many lulls in which to laze around camps, between campaigns and in inclement weather, the Civil War cavalryman saw almost daily duty.

Today, only some weapons and artifacts remain as a tangible reality of the colorful American Civil War cavalryman.

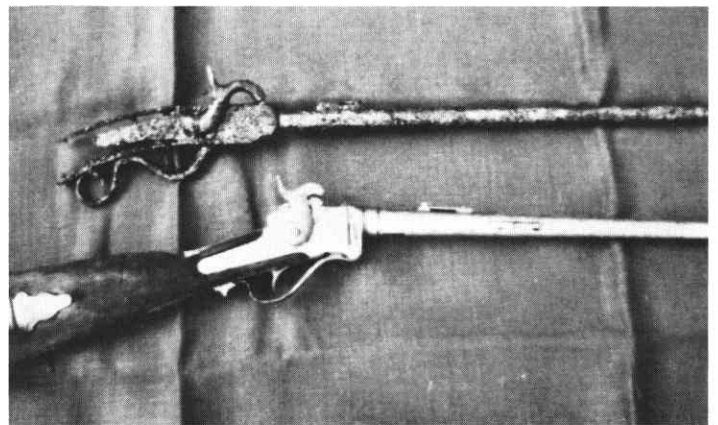


Figure 6.



Figure 5.

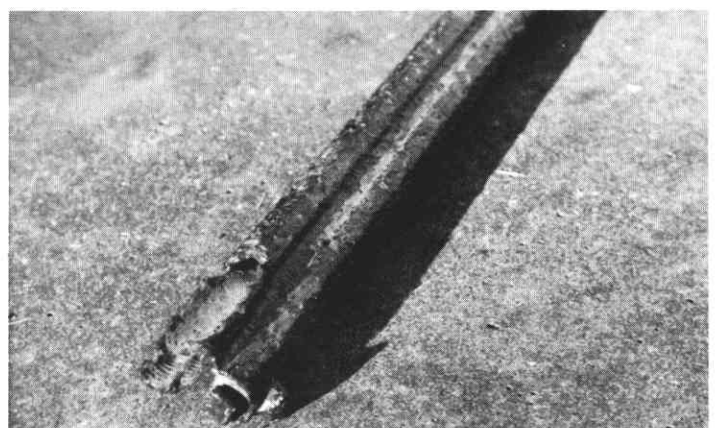
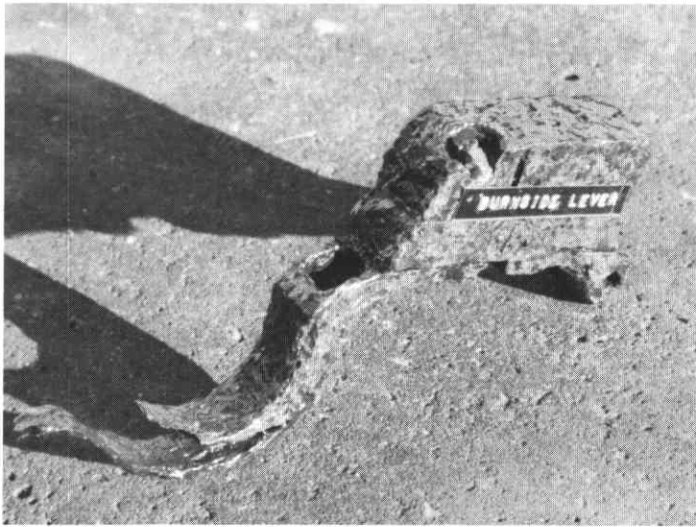


Figure 7.



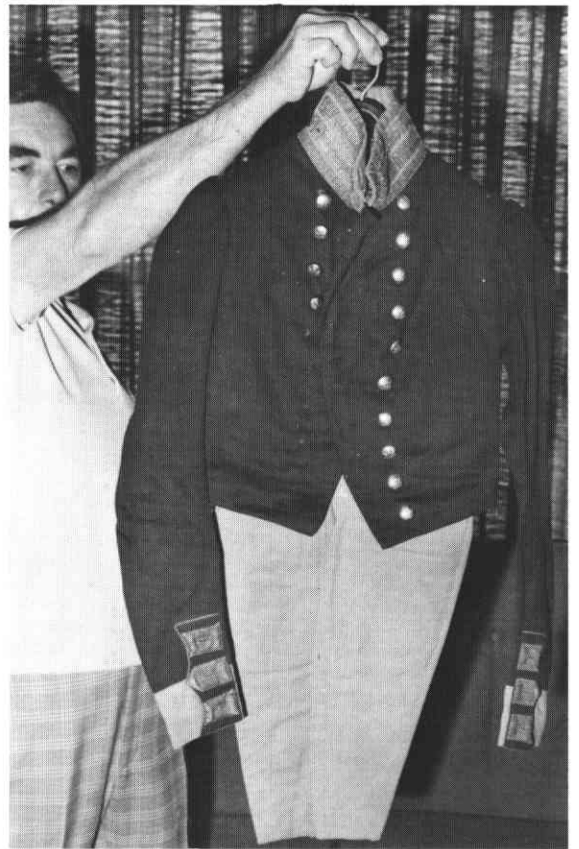
Dug-up Burnside lever.



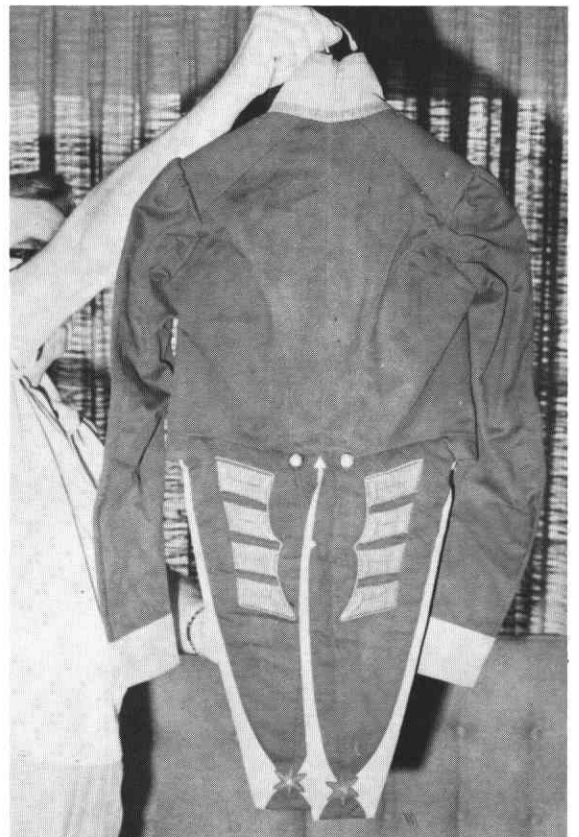
Campsite items.



Cavalry relics.



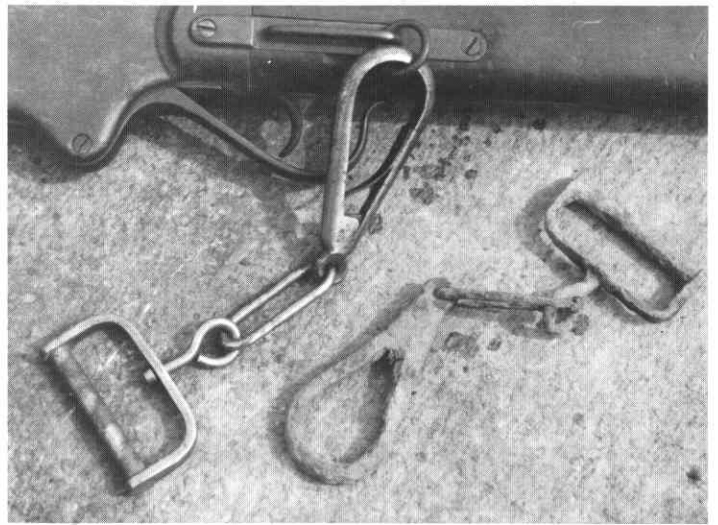
Early Dragoon Officer's jacket.



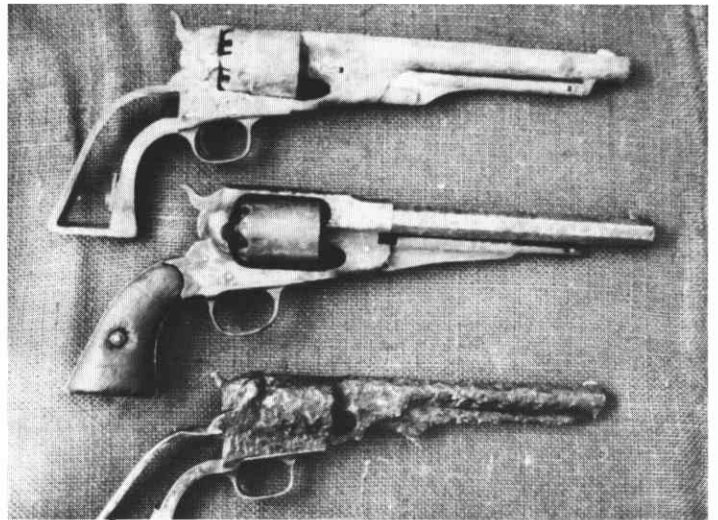
Rear of Dragoon Officer's jacket.



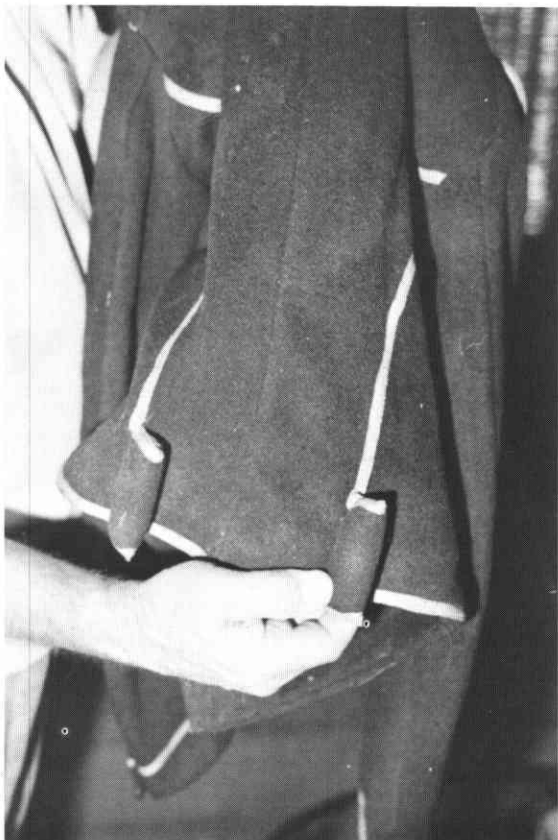
Typical trooper with Sharps carbine.



Carbine swivels: mint and dug.



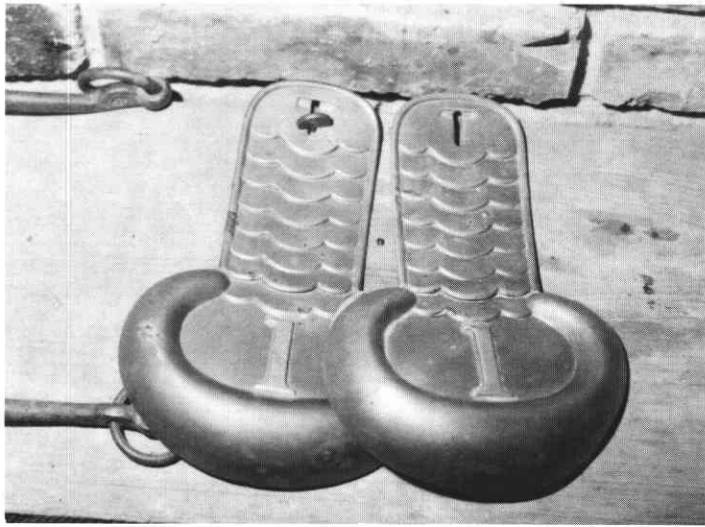
Dug relics: 1860 Army Colt; New Model Remington; Manhattan.



Back of enlisted man's jacket. showing belt rests.



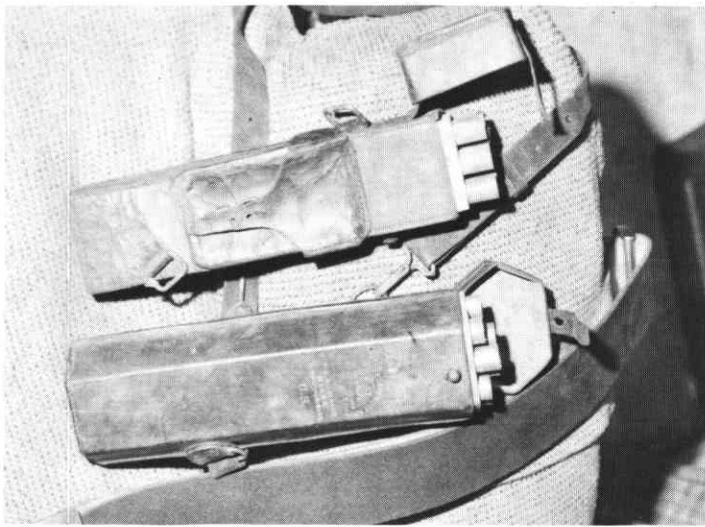
Enlisted man's jacket with epaulets.



Early epaulets.



Assorted carbine cartridges (and a Whitworth bullet) with Maynard tape and Sharps disc primers.



Blakeslee's cartridge boxes for Spencer: early (top) and late models.



A first model Burnside and an old pipe.



Billy Spedale holding a Spencer carbine. Bill Moore wouldn't let you see any more of her before. He wanted you to look at the guns. See the Spencer?



Himself and some of the collection.