

PROBING THE QUESTIONABLE

by Samuel E. Smith



SAMUEL E. SMITH

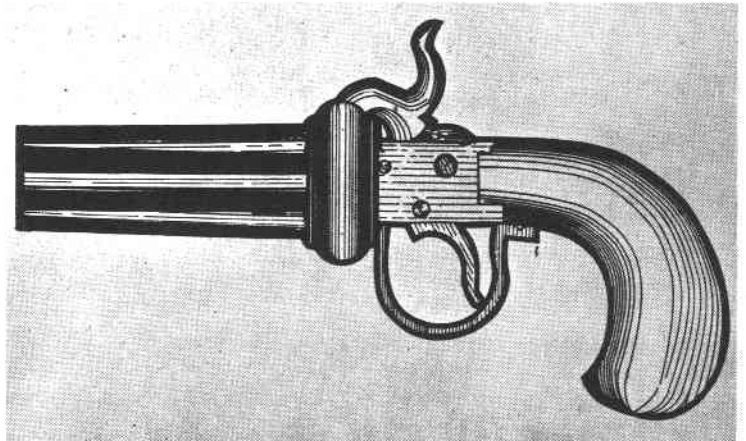
On the American Society programs, the Sunday morning speaker has several problems: the late Saturday night before, men in the audience who are anxious to leave, others who want to start packing so they can leave, and still others who want to have a final look at the fine displays or a final talk with another member. Since this is break-away day as we say in showbiz, I intend to be somewhat brief.

The title of this talk is "Probing the Questionable" and I've done a bit of this probing research on American firearms in the past. To cite an instance, and also to get us to thinking along those lines, I will briefly mention a concern of mine a long time ago with those little .31 caliber percussion revolvers stamped "LONDON PISTOL CO." and also marked "PATENTED Dec. 27, 1859." During those years that I'd been collecting, dealers and collectors alike had considered them as having been made by the London Pistol Company in England that took over from Sam Colt after his plant ceased production there in 1857. But the absence of proof marks and that patent date stamping made me wonder. I identified the patent and got a copy of it from the U. S. Patent Office, began recording serial numbers and finally wound up writing a little article in Dec. 1946

in Nick Harrison's old GUN COLLECTOR magazine. Later, in Wally Nutter's excellent MANHATTAN FIRE-ARMS book, we got the full story, but I like to think that my little probing started the ball rolling.

This morning, in "Probing the Questionable," I am going to talk about pepperboxes—a certain pepperbox—the Darling. As many of us are aware, there are two main breeds of the Darling pepperbox—the 1st Model Darling that has the iron frame and iron barrels and is marked "B. & B.M. Darling Patent" and a number, such as: 4, 5, 11, 113, 115, all of which I have noted.

And then there are the so-called Darling brass percussion pepperboxes with the distinctive brass frame, barrels and trigger guard. These come in a variety of shots, 3, 4, and 6 there are also single shot and double barrel pistols whose characteristics in workmanship of manufacture make it certain they have the same origin as the pepperboxes. Markings on all of these, pepperboxes and pistols alike, consist of various groups of initials such as: J. ENGH, AIS, ACS, IEH. Unfortunately these brass barrel and frame pepperboxes and pistols were not serial numbered — and you know how I like pieces to be serial numbered. However, I would estimate I have seen perhaps 85 of all sizes of these brass pepperboxes and there might be nearly that many more kicking around that I haven't seen nor heard of. It gives you an idea of the number in existence today in comparison with but 7 of iron pepperboxes marked Darling. It is doubtful if production of the latter went much over one hundred and it can accurately be classed as the most desirable of all American pepperboxes.



A SWEDISH DARLING

Except for a brief mention by Charles W. Sawyer in a magazine article that appeared in the Oct. 1926 issue of ANTIQUES, and thus I suspect was not widely read by gun collectors, nothing was written about the Darling Pepperbox until an article by a young author appeared in January 1942 issue of the old GUN REPORT magazine, edited by Russ Patterson in Akron, Ohio. Since I shall refer to it again, and the errors it contains, I might as well admit to being the author. The brass pepperboxes were illustrated and described, but at that

time there was no knowledge of the whereabouts of one of the iron frame pepperboxes marked Darling, so they were unfortunately omitted from illustration and description. While this little gun magazine didn't receive wide circulation, it obviously reached a sufficient number of collectors, dealers and authors so the findings of the article were read and preached as the gospel. Even without the additional information in the article, gun lists and catalogs had for years listed these brass pepperboxes as being made by the Darling Brothers in Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

Back in December of 1947 I received a letter from Bill Locke mentioning that he had just acquired a double barrel Darling pin-fire pistol. Now this caused me some thought. I'd never heard of a Darling pin-fire before; in fact, I wasn't just sure when I'd ever seen an American-made pin-fire of any kind. I later saw the piece when Bill kindly brought it to one of the Ohio Gun Collectors Association meetings to show me—and the thought came to me that it just didn't look American! I had always associated pin-fires with foreign origin.

Since I had at that time a number of unmarked brass pepperboxes and pistols of the so-called Darling make in my collection, I took the whole lot with me to the United States Forest Products Lab in Madison, Wisconsin and had the wood stocks analyzed. Not a one was stocked in American wood, all were European maple or other wood grown in northern Europe. This caused some thinking on my part—and remember gentlemen it was I who had written that illuminating article on the Darling Pepperbox.

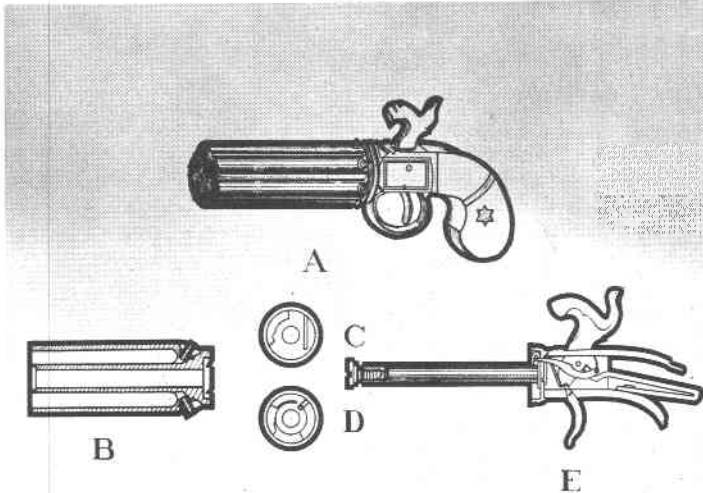
After a couple of years with this Darling question in the back of my mind, I learned of Tage Lasson of Copenhagen, Denmark. Mr. Lasson was a fine gentleman and a gun collector who could correspond in English, and incidentally he was quite a resistance fighter during the War. Mr. Lasson wrote me that the Swedish arms collectors maintain that the brass so-called Darling pepperboxes were all made in Sweden. Mr. Lasson passed away, but I had the same story confirmed later by Dr. Arne Hoff of Kobenhaven, Denmark.

Through the courtesy of our fellow member, Jack Dunlap, author of that excellent book "AMERICAN, BRITISH & CONTINENTAL PEPPERBOX FIREARMS," I am going to quote parts of an article by Mr. Eric Ashede, a prominent Swedish arms collector, entitled: "Brass Weapons of Amaland (Smoland)":
Some common weapons in firearms collections are revolvers made of brass, sometimes called (county constable) revolvers. The origin is, on the other hand, unknown to most people. In the weapons-literature, one encounters them rarely one part of the American authors attributes them to Americans. Those that are signed "J. ENGH" are ascribed to one J. Englehart of Nazareth, Pa. Now this just isn't so. The master gunsmith is named Johan Engholm of Hestra, Odestugu (a town in the Swedish province of Smaland). That is something I have known for a long time. In literature, I first met it in Stockel, "Evaluation of Hand Firearms Part I" which clearly states "J. Engholm, Odestugu, approx. 1865."

(There continues a description of several chandeliers and candlesticks of brass, all marked as made or produced by J. Engholm at Hestra from 1868 to 1872, and states the marking is "J. ENGH," just as one sees on so many pistols and revolvers")

Anders Gustafsson was a servant at Johan Engholm's and in addition to the usual servant's tasks, he was helpful with the weapon's production. He married a daughter of the house in 1869, Johanna, and continued, even while he cultivated his own plot of ground, to work on the pistols and revolvers which he now signed himself "AGS."

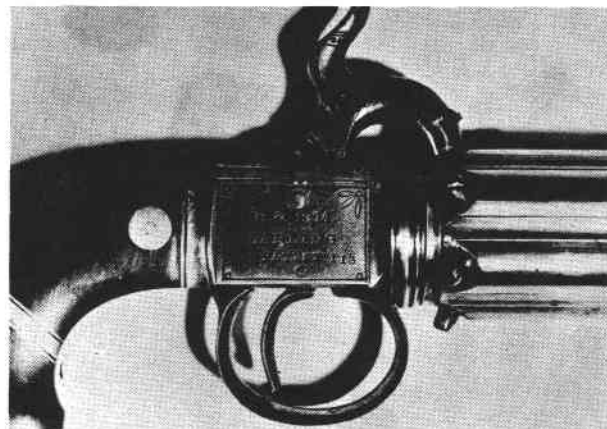
But back to Johan Engholm. He was born in 1820 and died in 1918. He probably began production during the 1840's. The grandson, Oscar Engholm, declares that in the home of the grandparents there was a pistol and a gun both with flintlocks and fabricated by the grandfather . . . the signature AIS is that of Anders Johannesson of Rmenas, in Malmbacks Parish, who began his career as a gunsmith at Engholm's and so gradually started his own production of pistols and revolvers and also other things like mortars and candlesticks, which he signed "AIS" . . . The weapons which are found in the USA have, with all likelihood, followed the Swedes who emigrated to that large land in the West. They traveled during the period 1850-1914 with a total of about a million people, of which 80,000 were Smalanders with unknown destination. Many brought along pocket weapons they best knew, or were least expensive. Here are the signatures I have met—more certainly exist:



PATENT DRAWINGS FOR DARLING IRON PISTOL
Photo courtesy Milwaukee Public Museum

J. ENGH - Johna Engholm, Odestugu, 1820-1918. Produced 1840-1904. (that late a date is doubtful)
 IEH - probably the earliest of the same shop.
 AGS - Anders Gustafsson, Odestugu, 1835-1924. Production 1896 to about 1900.
 AIS - Andres Johannesson, Romenas, Malmbacks Parish. 1840-1914. Production to about 1895. or earlier.

I believe now that we have completely established that these brass pepperboxes, unmarked except for the maker's initials, were all made in Sweden and brought to this country by the emigrants. To further confirm this, both Jack Dunlap and I know of nearly a dozen instances where we could trace back the original ownership of one of these brass pepperboxes to a Swedish emigrant who brought it with him to this country. Of course the seven known iron frame and iron barrel percussion pepperboxes marked E. & B.M. DARLING (and including the one marked "W. GLAZE COLUMBIA, S. C." which was written up in Nov. 1955 American Rifleman) are the only remaining evidence of the Darling manufacture.



The first written hint that these brass pepperboxes were NOT American made appeared in Jim Serven's "Collecting of Guns", in Frank Horner's chapter on pepperboxes. In recent years I had mentioned to some friends about my suspicions of the Swedish origin of the brass pepperboxes. Shortly prior to Jim's book being published, Henry Stewart was visiting Jim and the subject came up and Jim wrote me wanting to know what about it? I was a bit reluctant to disclose everything at that time because I had the idea of an article on "The Swedish Darling" in mind, but I did feel that Frank Horner's pepperbox chapter should not contain an error that I could prevent. So Jim and I stuck this sentence in Frank's chapter without his permission: "Doubt has been expressed as to whether these types were actually made by the Darling Brothers. Research on this subject is being carried out as this book is being written and it may result in an interesting story for pepperbox collectors in the future."

However, perhaps the most interesting part is yet to come: How did the Darling name tag become attached to those brass Swedish pepperboxes? Gentlemen, I went through 87 of those old auction house catalogs of American arms auctions from 1906 on, and also the A. E. Brooks catalog of 1899. I poured through those now yellowed and crackling old Bannerman Catalogs from shortly after 1900 up into the 1920's. Nothing on the identification of those brass barreled pepperboxes appeared until: the Merwin Sales Co. sale of the Jacob Steiner collection in N.Y. Oct. 20, 1914, item 324, illustrated, describes a "6 shot brass barrel & frame perc. pepperbox stamped AIS." Described as "made in Pennsylvania. Extremely rare and found in few collections."

The next came the Scott & O'Shaughnessy, New York sale of the John Meeks collection on Oct. 24, 1916, item 613, offered and correctly identified an iron frame and iron barrel first model Darling. However, the Scott & O'Shaughnessy sale of Feb. 5, 1919, item 178, illustrated on its Frontispiece the following: "Darling percussion pepperbox. 4 shot. This was made by Benjamin M. Darling of Woonsocket, R. I. who died about 25 years ago and claimed that he was the maker of the first American revolver. The cataloger has a cut and advertisement of this revolver which reads: Darling Patent Rotary Pistol, made & sold wholesale and retail by B. & B.M. Darling Woonsocket, R. I. The rarest and most interesting of early American pieces."

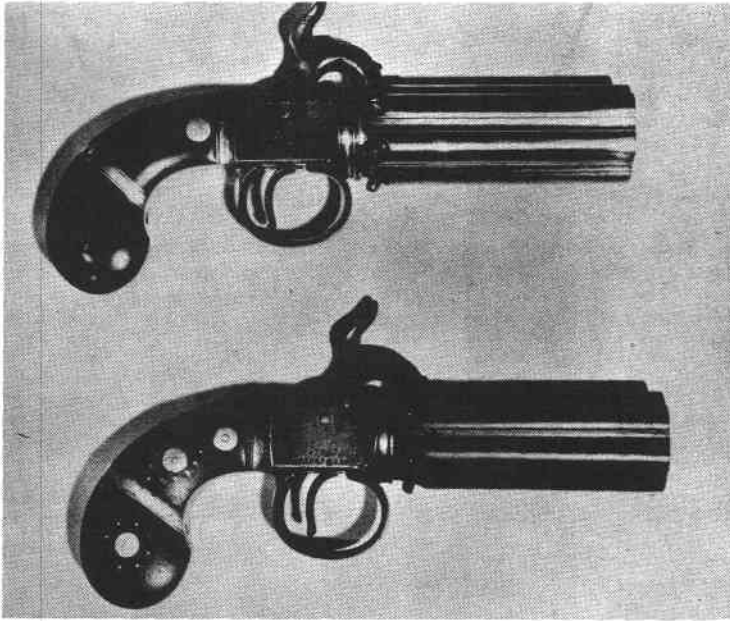
Now who was that cataloger? I quote from a letter in my files that identifies him. It reads: "Williamsburg, Virginia, March 30, 1942. Paragraph 4 states: in one of my scrap books is an advertising circular showing the Darling Pepperbox and I have been offered \$10.00 for this circular many a time. Signed: Stephen Van Rensselaer."



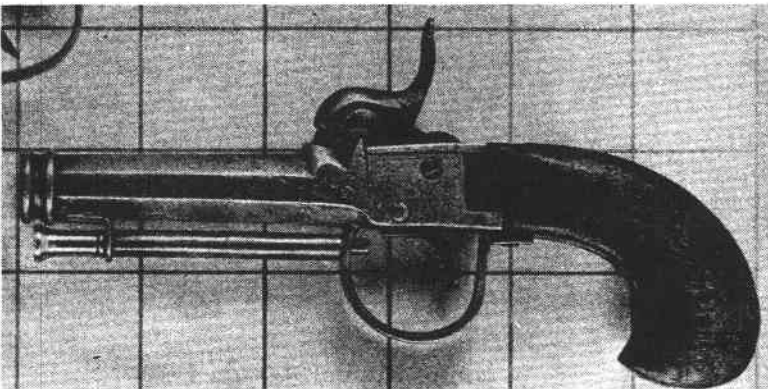
6 SHOT DARLING WITH AGENT'S NAME "W. GLAZE COLUMBIA, S. C." NOTE LONG BARREL SECTION

To save space, I'll consolidate my talk at Denver and say that I mentioned seven Scott & O'Shaughnessy and Walpole Auction House catalogs from 1919 thru 1924, all of which give nearly identical identification of these brass pepperboxes as being made by the Darling Brothers and being very rare and very valuable. There was also the mention that the cataloger (whom we thus identify as Mr. Van Rensselaer) had this rare & original Darling advertisement.

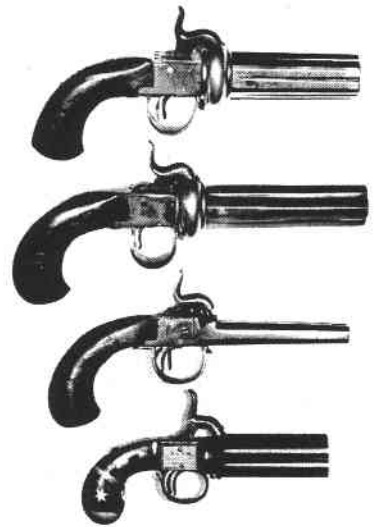
Thus we can see how the Swedish Darling myth was established. I knew Mr. Van Rensselaer quite well and had met him on numerous occasions in Williamsburg, Virginia and Peterborough, New Hampshire and bought a fair number of guns from him before he died in 1945. He was one of the old time dealer-collectors with a great deal of knowledge and willing to give his opinion—which, as in the case of the Swedish Darling, was sometimes in error. I hope all of you have had as much enjoyment in learning the true identity of the Swedish Darling and how her buildup was accomplished as I had in running it down.



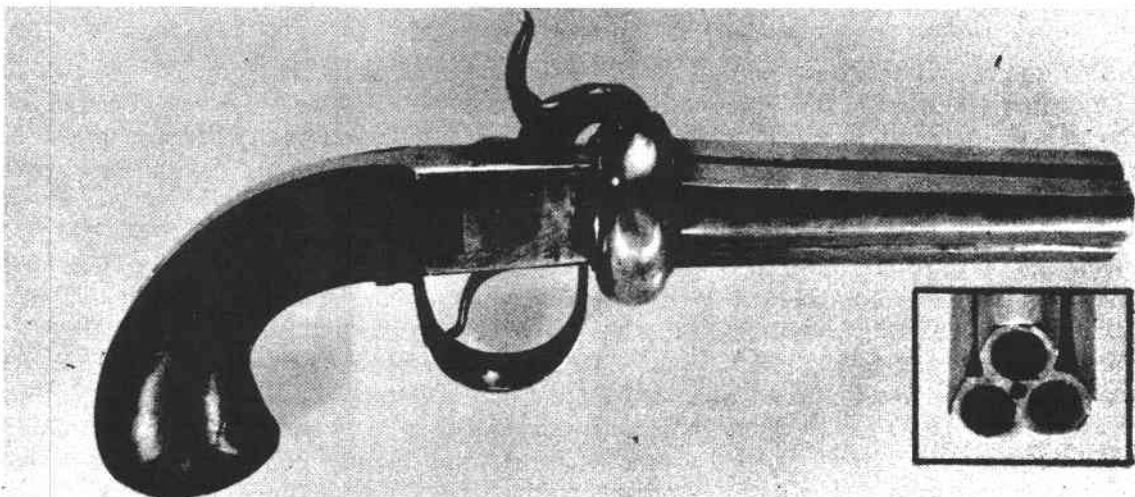
TWO SPECIMENS OF THE 6 SHOT IRON DARLING PEPPERBOX, SERIALS (top)113, (bot)11.



"SINGLE SHOT DARLING PISTOL, SAM SMITH COLLECTION"



(Top to Bot) FOUR, SIX & TWO BARREL BRASS, SIX BARREL IRON



Side View of Darling Three-Shot Pistol Insert Shows Barrel Construction