

## RARE TRAPDOOR SPRINGFIELDS

### PART 2

By Archer L. Jackson  
Edgewater Beach Hotel, Chicago, Ill. April 1, 1966

#### THE MARKSMANS MODEL



ARCHER L. JACKSON

perfect stock, is one of the handsomest weapons military, that we have seen. Now there was a trapdoor rifle floating around on the collectors market that just so happened to fit this description, and it became known forever after as the Marksman's model.

The rifle that the Army & Navy Journals correspondent was really talking about was the "Long range rifle" that we have just discussed.

This mis-named rifle was put together from the Army surplus and condemned parts that were sold at auction to the gun import-export firm of Hartley & Graham in New York City. These rebuilt rifles were offered for sale in the Hartley & Graham catalog in calibers of .40-65 and .45-70, for the price of \$12.00. (see photo of catalog ad). The action, lock and metal hardware parts were buffed down recasehardened and re-blued, the stock was cut down, a horn insert added and then refinished. The octagon barrel looks as though it might have been made by Sharps Rifle Company. I think that Hartley & Graham purchased them from Sharps when they folded up.

Again credit should be given to Captain Litchfield for his original idea to create a rifle as a prize for excellence in marksmanship. His letter of February 18, 1879 which started the production of long range rifles also outlined his views on prizes. Maj. General W. L. Hancock in his letter of August 17, 1879 also thought the Army should give prize rifles since it had no funds available to give fancy medals or cash like the civilian rifle clubs. Eleven days later the General of the Army answered his letter saying, no, not at this time.

But with the great interest developing in the National Rifle Association's fall shooting matches at Creedmoor in 1879 and 1881 the demand for prizes became greater and greater. Also the use of the long range rifles fanned the Army team's desires for some recognition. The publication of the book "Laidley's Rifle Firing" in 1879 is what brought on some of these letters.

Col. T. T. S. Laidley, Commander of the Watertown Arsenal was ordered by the Chief of Ordnance in 1877 to prepare a new up-to-date book on a course of rifle firing. On page 170 of this 234 page book, which was privately printed, Col. Laidley says "Marksmen will be permitted to wear a white button with a black circle

One of the rarest Springfield rifles ever produced at the National Armory was the Marksman's model. The quest for facts concerning this piece was what got me started digging through the musty armory records stored at the National Archives in Washington, D. C.

I would like to set the record straight to start with that the "Marksman's" rifle was given as a shooting prize only in the year of 1881. The total, 11 rifles, was all that was ever produced -- 2 different sample arms and the 9 that were given as prizes.

Much mis-information has been in print for a great number of years by different authors and which is now taken as the gospel among our collecting fraternity. Most of them call it the "Sharpshooters Rifle" for long range sniping, having either special sights or a telescope sight. I think that where most of them were led astray is, when in 1927 L. D. Satterlee found an item in the September 25, 1880 Army-Navy Journal, page 149.

"Creedmoor Match, September 17, 1880.

"During the winter of 1879-1880, the Ordnance Department, U.S.A., sought to perfect a rifle that, in the hands of a good team, should win. This as the record of the match proves, they have most successfully accomplished and the rifle used by the Army teams in 1880, with its six groove barrel, special sights, increased ammunition, and

in the center on each side of the collar of the coat, and will be provided with a marksman's rifle."

Finally, on May 10, 1881 the Army issued its General order No. 44, which tried to clear up all the confusion and set down in order form their policy on marksmanship; the awarding of prizes, and the first official notice that a marksman's rifle, as a prize, would be issued. May 11, 1881 is the day that the Chief of Ordnance notified Col. Benton at Springfield Armory to start on a sample rifle and also to start preparing designs of medals to be given as prizes. This letter is as follows:

"Sir:

I enclose copy of General Orders No. 44 of May 10, 1881 and invite your special attention to its provisions.

"You are now preparing a Marksman's Rifle, and you will perceive that this order requires to use service ammunition, and that only three for each Military Division will be required annually and three for the Army, every alternate year. As this rifle is the second prize in value in both divisions and Army contests, it should be made a handsome and valuable weapon, with all the modern appliances and plate name, etc., no objection to the cost being as much as \$50.00 each.

"You will please prepare, or have prepared, suitable devices and designs, for the four medals mentioned in this order - Gold, \$200.00, Gold, \$100.00, Silver, \$10.00, Silver, \$5.00. These may be arranged as a breastpin to fasten on the coat or with a ribbon like an Army badge, and should be of different shapes to distinguish them, etc.

"Drawings of these must be first prepared to receive the sanction of higher authority, before any are made. When the design is approved proper dies will be made so that they can be duplicated when needed, etc."

The month of July, according to tally books of the Springfield Armory, is when the actual work on the sample Marksman's model began. This book lists the workman's name, where he worked, what he did, how many days, how much he received a day, and the total cost. By the way, these machinists worked for between \$2.75 to \$3.50 per day -- Freeman R. Bull was paid \$3.50 per day. The design and execution of this work on the rifle had been under the personal supervision of Col. J. G. Benton, Commander of the Armory. Suddenly on the night of August 23, 1881, Col. Benton died of a heart attack. He had been in command of the Springfield Armory since June of 1866. I think that, if he had lived, a number of the subsequent difficulties would not have occurred.

Capt. John E. Greer became temporary commander of the arsenal and supervised the work on the sample arm. On September 5, 1881 he sent the rifle and this letter to the Chief of Ordnance in Washington, D. C.:

"Sir:

"I have the honor to inform you that I have this day sent by express to your address a sample 'Marksmans rifle' prepared under your instructions of May 11, 1881.

"I enclose herewith, a statement of the Master Armorer from which it appears that the limit of \$50.00 as contained in the instructions above referred to has been reached.

"The stock had to be made by hand; the butt plate, guard, barrel, etc., are different from the regular pattern causing a very decided increase in expense.

"The engraving of lock-plate, tang of butt-plate, breech-block, etc., like that of the Officers rifle, together with set trigger would add several dollars to the cost.

"Should this rifle meet with your approval I would respectfully request that it be returned to this Armory as a guide in the preparation of others."

Enclosed was the statement of cost from the Master Armorer Samuel W. Porter, to Catp. Greer:

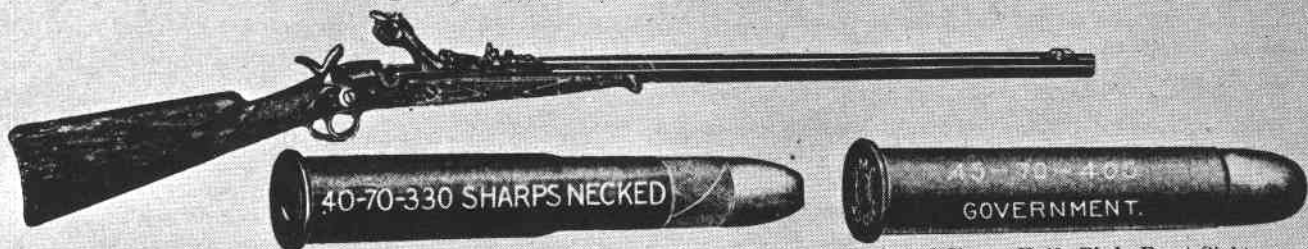
Rough stock	\$ 2.50
Labor on stock	\$16.50
Barrel assembled with rear sight	\$ 7.47
Lock complete	\$ 2.17
Extra work on hammer	\$ .50
Guard complete	\$ .72
Butt-plate screws, etc.	\$ 1.95
Horn tip (rough)	\$ .32
Front and rear sights (Bull)	\$17.00
Shell extractor	\$ .22
Jointed ramrod	\$ .65
	<u>\$50.00</u>

# THE MARKSMANS RIFLE



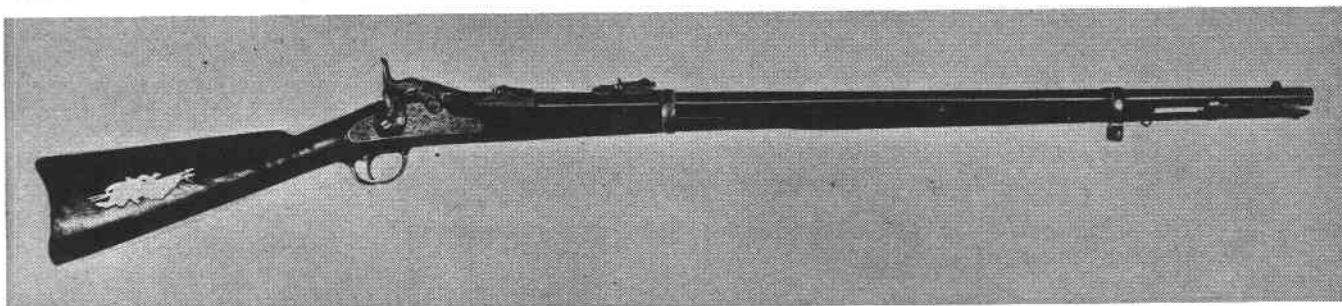
The "So Called" Marksman Rifle, which was in reality a rifle assembled from condemned parts by the Hartley & Graham Co.

## SPRINGFIELD SPORTING RIFLES.

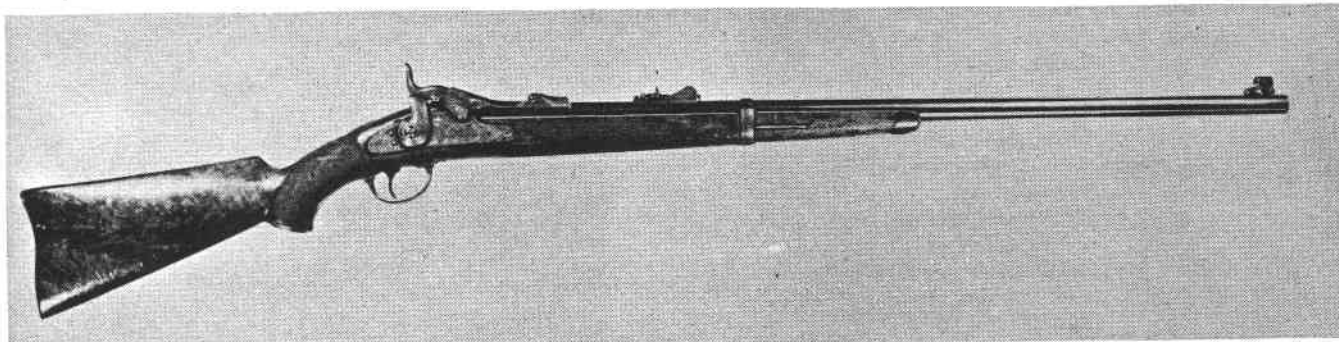


No. 10. 40-70 Straight and 45-70 Straight Cartridges, 30-inch, 10 to 10½ lbs., Buckhorn Rear and Sharps Knife Blade Front Sight, Jointed Cleaning Rod in Butt, Checkered..... \$8 00.  
 Use Sharps Reloading Tools for Springfield Rifle 45-70 Cartridge. Per Set, \$1.50.

From the Hartley & Graham catalog of 1903. These converted rifles appeared in the 1889 catalog at \$12.00 each.

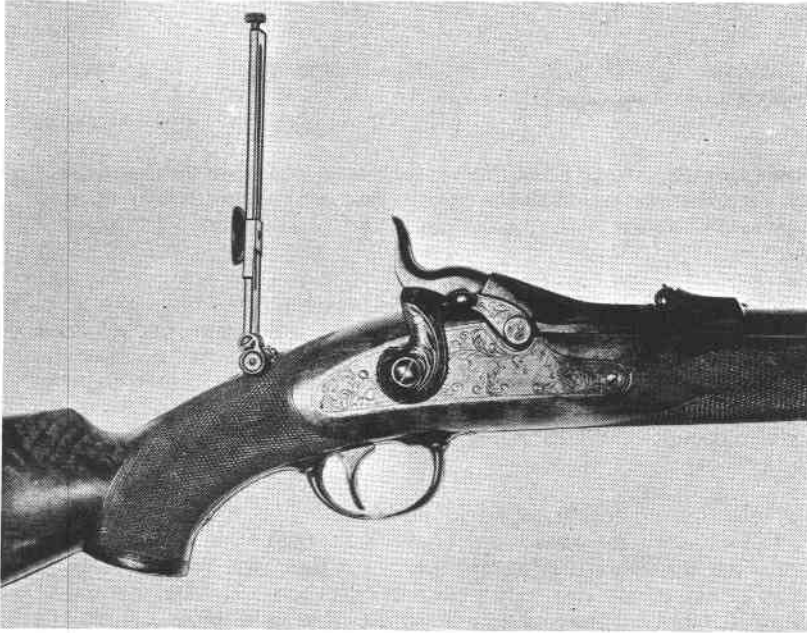


General Sherman's idea of how the Marksman's Rifle should look. This triangular ram rod bayonet rifle was badly burned in the Armory Museum fire of 1932.



The Marksman's Rifle, second class prize in the Army Rifle Matches at Creedmoor, Sept. 1881. Only nine awarded, barrel 28" O.A. 47".

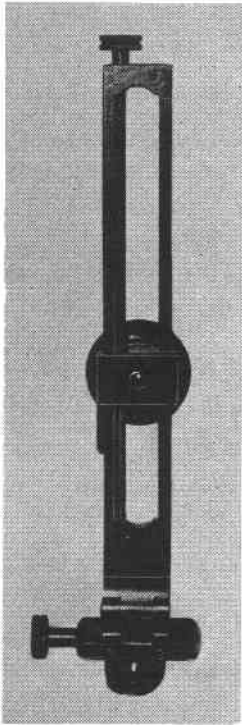
# THE MARKSMANS RIFLE



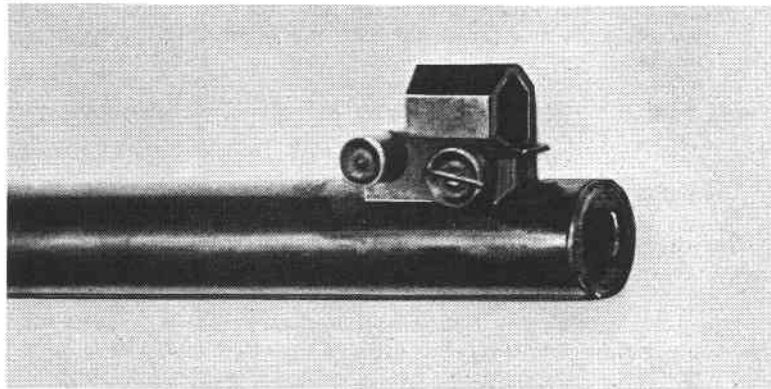
Side view of Lt. R. C. Van Vliet's Rifle. He wanted to exchange it for a medal. From the collection of the Campfire Club.



Silver Pistol Grip Cap Inscription Plate on the Lt. R. C. Van Vliet Rifle.



Rear Vernier Sight with windage adjustment in base. Only 15 were made in 1881.



Marksman's Rifle removeable front sight with spirit level. Sight fits over regular service front sight.

The serial number of the first sample rifle shipped to Washington was 168953, but when the nine Marksman's rifle were eventually produced they had no serial number, only 1881 in script on the back of the receiver, just ahead of the tang.

Now comes a letter which I think is a classic. General William Tecumseh Sherman, Chief of the Army, writes a letter to General S. V. Benet, Chief of Ordnance, setting forth his views on the sample rifle.

"General-

September 17, 1881

"I have before me the very handsome rifle prepared at Springfield Arsenal under the immediate supervision of the late Col. Benton with the statement of the cost of the parts submitted by Master Armorer Sam W. Porter. I do not propose to be a good judge of such articles but venture to make a few suggestions for your consideration.

"The form of the butt or stock is German not American. I prefer the stock to be of the same form as in the Service Rifle, and the silver plate for inscription to be inserted into the off side of the cheek piece. The two sights on the barrel front and rear, should suffice, omitting that on the small of the stock, or if that be deemed necessary that it be so made as to be put on further forward, so that the kicking of the rifle with heavy charge would not hurt the right hand. I think the trigger should have a tip screw so as to enable the rifleman to set his trigger as a hair trigger. I would also add the new bayonet ramrod.

"Now in making up the cost of \$50.00 I notice that the hand work on the stock is \$16.50. By retaining the familiar form of the stock much of this cost will be saved for selecting the best sample of seasoned walnut it would be shaped in the rough by machinery only using hand work for the final finish. The front and rear sights at \$17.00 seems high and by using only two sights instead of three some saving could be made here giving plenty of room for embellishment. Inasmuch as this rifle is to be a prize and may be in after years used in contests the barrel and sights ought not to be any different from the service rifle. The extra cost should be in fine finish and in the silver embellishment, which might be somewhat elaborate.

"I advise you to retain this sample . . . and have one prepared to fulfill my fancy and then we can compare, decide and announce the decision.

"W. T. Sherman"

How about that?! He doesn't propose to be a good judge of such articles -- but -- ventures to make a -- few -- suggestions. And then old "Fire and Brimstone" Sherman tells them what he wants. I'll bet this shook up the Chief of Ordnance and the boys back at the Armory. The Chief quickly sent this hot potato back to Springfield with this covering letter the very same day, September 17, 1881.

"Respectfully returned to C. O. National Armory enclosing letters from the General of the Army. You will please make a Marksman Rifle that will embody his views. Ornament it with silver. Chase the lock and receiver. Shape the entire stock like the service arm, putting a silver plate on the right flat of the stock. Omit the expensive sights, and make as handsome an arm as you can. Send it to this office that he may compare it with the gun sent me which I will keep."

Well, it was back to the old drawing board, for the tally books show work started on sample rifle number 2 in October.

The day just prior to these two letters General Order #70 was issued.

"1. To correct certain misapprehensions existing as to the meaning of General Orders No. 44, of May 10, 1881, from this office, it is ordered:

"2. Marksman's rifles will only be issued as prizes - three to each Division team annually, and three to the Army team every alternate year. No marksman's rifles have yet been made or issued.

"3. Marksman's rifles, when issued as prizes, may be admitted in contests, as they will be suited to the service ammunition.

"4. The LONG RANGE rifles mentioned in paragraph VIII of General Orders No. 44, are not 'marksman's rifles,' and will be used for experimental purposes, but not in Department, Division or Army teams.

"By Command of General Sherman."

This letter finally sets it straight for everybody that the Marksman's rifle is a prize only and not a sharpshooter's rifle nor is it for long range sniping.

By October 20, 1881 sample #2 was finished and shipped down to Washington for the General's perusal. Capt. Greer's covering letter is as follows:

"A sample marksman's rifle, has this day been sent you by express which is thought to conform to your instructions.

"The trigger may be set by simple pressing it to the front, the piece being cocked, until a distinct click is heard. By means of the small screw just in rear of the trigger the pull may be varied when the trigger is set from 0 to 1-1/2 lbs. When not set the pull is that of the service rifle.

"The ramrod-bayonet rifle is not so accurate a shooting arm as the service rifle due to the inertia of the bayonet, which is attached to the underside of the barrel, throwing up the muzzle when the gun recoils. Good accuracy, however, may be obtained by removing the bayonet during the firing. As it is thought the marksmen of the Army will not be satisfied without peep and globe or aperture sights, I would respectfully call your attention to those on the sample marksmans rifle, previously sent you. The peep-sight has a vernier horizontal as well as vertical motion thus permitting allowance to be made for wind drift, etc., without compelling the firer to look into the muzzle of a loaded rifle as is the case with others in which this allowance is given by the front-sight, the graduation marks of which are necessarily on its front face, the spirit level being on the rear to be caught by the eye.

"The globe sight, as well as the peep sight, may be removed by simply turning the milled head screw at its right then bringing to view the service front sight for use with the service rear sight on the barrel.

"Should the gun first sent you be preferred, the engraved breech-system on this gun can be transferred to it. The additional cost will be \$2.50. Set trigger \$2.85 extra.

"A statement of the cost of this gun is enclosed.

"It is thought that additional guns of either pattern may be made at less cost as these were necessarily more or less tentative.

"I am indebted to Mr. R. G. Shurtleff of this Armory for the design of the silver plate. The shield and scroll are intended for the name of the winner, etc.

"If adopted I would respectfully request that the gun may be returned to this Armory to be used as a guide in the preparation of others, etc.

"John E. Greer  
"Captain of Ordnance  
"Commanding"

The cost breakdown of the arm was:

Springfield rifle rod	
bayonet less stock	\$14.71
Stock (wood part) labor upon	\$ 7.57
Silver for plate	\$ 2.50
Engraving silver plate	\$ 5.00
Labor on silver plate	\$ 8.40
Set trigger and tumbler	\$ 2.85
Engraving system	\$ 2.50
	<u>\$43.53</u>

Now, I'll wager the similarity of the prices didn't set too well with the General -- \$50.00 against \$43.53.

Imagine, his idea of a Marksmans rifle was only \$6.47 cheaper than that horrible "German looking rifle." Well, he wasn't going to give up, so on October 25, 1881 he sent both sample rifles down to the Washington Barracks, on the outskirts of Washington, D. C., with the instructions to see which one the soldiers preferred.

The Commander of the Barracks turned this job over to a 1st Lt. W. P. Edgerton, who reported back on December 5, 1881 on how the pieces fired. He had test fired them, he said, and that they were about equal. But he liked the looks and fancy sights of rifle No. 1, the one the armory had designed with a pistol grip stock.

The Lieutenant must have been reprimanded because on December 12, 1881, he defended himself in a letter saying that he had misconstrued the order; the weather had been bad, and also that a ship docked at the wharfs blocked their rifle range. By December 14th, General Sherman received these reports and he's not too happy with such goings on. So he fires off the following to the Chief of Ordnance:

" . . . The General desires me to say that the officers charged with the conduct of the experiments have misconceived the purpose for which they were sent to the Barracks. He wished to know the form of rifle preferred by the soldier, not its accuracy, which has already been tested.

"The General inclines to recommend the short rifle for the Division prizes and the long one for the Army prizes. . . ."

The short rifle is the pistol grip model (No. 1) and the longer rifle is the ramrod bayonet one.

Orders went down the chain of command and the Chief of Ordnance sent this "letter to manufacturer" to the Springfield Armory on December 15, 1881.

"Sir:

"I sent you the Marksman's rifle just submitted to this office - You will please have twenty four (24) of them made as soon as possible - say within the next two months.

"The rear sight on small of stock might be moved a little forward to give more room to the hand when aiming.

"The plate for inscription is hardly large enough and should be made as large as possible on the end of the pistol grip, nearly two inches in diameter.

"The chasing on lock plate, receiver, etc., should be the same as that on the officers rifle."

You will note that they chose the first sample marksmans rifle, the short one, the one with fancy sights and a pistol grip stock. But two days later along comes this letter to change and reduce the number to be made.

"Sir:

December 17, 1881

"Referring to my letter to you of the 15th inst. directing you to make twenty-four (24) Marksmans rifles. I have now to direct that only nine (9) be made the number twenty-four (24) being an error."

Well, there you are, make "only 9" Marksmans rifles.

Why? What caused the change in their thinking? I could never find anything to resolve this interesting point. But I think that I might have a clue.

In my search I did find a letter from Lt. R. C. Van Vliet, to the Commanding General, Department of the East, asking that he be allowed a medal instead of a Marksmans rifle to which he was entitled as second prize winner on the Division team. The Adjutant General answered December 12th that whatever prize the Lieutenant is entitled to him; that to change a rifle for a medal is impractical, and that only the number of medals called for in the General Orders will be made.

Lt. R. C. Van Vliet's name appears numerous times on the rosters of Army shooting teams throughout this period. His reluctance to accept a rifle and his desire for a shooting medal that he could wear might have had something to do with reduction of the number of rifles to be made. Or maybe this letter was all General Sherman needed to drop the whole idea, for he wasn't too keen about it to start with.

On February 28, 1882 the nine Marksman rifles were finished and ready for delivery to the soldiers who had won them at the Creedmoor matches in September of 1881. The rifles were ready, but the medals were not, until the end of May 1882. At this time three rifles together with the gold and the silver medals, were sent to each of the commanders of the Division of the Atlantic; the Division of the Missouri, and the Division of the Pacific.

Each Commander was responsible for having the name plate on the rifle and the medal suitably engraved with the winning soldier's name, and then presenting it to him.

The official death notice of the Marksmans rifles came in the form of General order No. 53 issued May 15, 1882 in paragraph VII.

" . . . The Marksmans rifle will no longer be issued as contemplated in paragraph 524, revised edition, Laidley's Rifle Firing. . . "

Thus ends the "Marksmans" story.

You have a pretty good idea of what the different rifles looked like from the preceding letters and the photos, but I'd like to add a few comments. The ammunition used in these rifles was the regular 45-70 service load. In the Springfield Armory museum you will find General Sherman's sample rifle (the ramrod bayonet

model), and two rifles stocked with the checkered integral pistol grip and Hotchkiss butt plate.

These last two have minor variations, such as one is engraved; the checkering pattern differs around the pistol grip, and the size of the round silver inlay in the bottom of the pistol grip varies. On these sample rifles and on the nine Marksman rifles the two escutcheons on the left side of the stock for the lock screws are different from those you will find on the regular trapdoor rifles. The two lock screws are recessed in a deep-dished escutcheon and do not protrude up above the side of the stock.

All of these rifles were badly burned in the Museum fire of 1932. When I first started research on this rifle back in 1955, I never dreamed that I would ever find a Marksmans rifle for sale or would ever own one. But after several years, I found one. The only complete Marksmans rifle I know of -- that is complete with all sights and silver inscription plate -- is in the collection of the Camp Fire Club of Chappagua, New York.

This is the rifle of Lt. R. C. Van Vliet, the man who didn't want it. He later became a Brigadier General.

The rear sight on the barrel is graduated in the normal way, but the letters M. R. for Marksmans rifle, are stamped on the left side and also on the leaf, while the service sights are stamped R. for rifle or C. for carbine.

#### Army Marksmanship Medals

The birth of the Army marksmanship program all started with that letter of May 11, 1881, and has continued down through the years to the present. The Army had never really given awards for shooting excellence "except for a period" prior to the Civil War. Silver, engraved "Stadia" were produced at Frankford Arsenal to be given out as prizes. Later plain brass stadia were used.

When the Chief of Ordnance ordered the prize rifles made he also put the task of designing the medals up to Col. Benton, Commander of the Springfield Arsenal. Col. Benton went to Tiffany & Company of New York City to have the designs prepared and the medals manufactured.

With all of the detail being handled by the Colonel personally, his sudden death on August 23, 1881, placed the Armory in a quandry, for Capt. Greer had discussed very little of the medal design program with Benton. Captain Greer could find only one unfinished letter the Colonel was writing the night he died, to the Chief of Ordnance on the different designs with the cost of the dies.

The first prize was a gold medal with diamonds to the value of \$200.00; the second prize was the Marksmans rifle; the third prize gold medal with a value of \$100.00 and fourth and fifth prizes of silver, with values of \$10.00 and \$5.00.

When the Secretary of War found out the die from Tiffany's would cost \$1,450.00 he stuttered a bit and said "let's economize; let's have the United States Mint produce the medals."

Captain Greer was assigned the task of negotiating with Tiffany & Company for the purchase of the medal designs they had made for Colonel Benton.

On November 12, 1881, Tiffany & Company wrote that their designers' department was maintained at a very great expense and "it is a rule never to sell their designs, nor to furnish them for any work to be done by others." But they were willing to make an exception in this instance and sell the design of the four medals approved by General Sherman for \$300.00, "provided this doesn't set a precedent" for the future.

Apparently the Secretary of War agreed to Tiffany's conditions and, having saved a neat \$1,150., the medals were struck by the United States Mint after some delay. They were subsequently delivered along with the Marksmans rifle in May of 1882. After the marksmans rifle was dropped another medal was designed and struck by the Mint for the fall of 1882 rifle matches.

This was the beginning of the marksmanship medals as now awarded by the Army. The whole story is another search project in itself. If you are interested in viewing the most complete collection of these gold, silver and bronze marksmanship medals they are on display in the museum at the Rock Island Arsenal at Rock Island, Illinois.

All the foregoing began as a project to prove that the authors of a number of gun books have for years incorrectly labeled a number of the trapdoor Springfield rifles. I believe I have accomplished this through bringing forth the facts from the records and correspondence at Springfield Armory where the work was done. All of the letters quoted herein were unearthed in the Old Army Branch of the National Archives in Washington, D. C. Observations on the different model trapdoor Springfields were made from rifles in my own collection, the West Point Museum, and the wonderful collection at the Springfield Armory museum.

I have provided you with the factual data on what the authentic rifles look like. Searching for one is now up to you.

Good hunting!



# MEDALS,



ARMY MARKSMANSHIP MEDALS, (L to R) 1st Prize Gold, 2nd Prize Gold, 3rd Prize Silver. 2nd Prize Medal replaced Marksmans Rifle in 1882.

## SPRINGFIELD BREECH LOADING RIFLE PRODUCTION FIGURES 1865 THROUGH 1894

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>MODEL</u>	<u>RIFLE</u>	<u>CARBINE</u>	<u>CADET</u>	<u>CAL.</u>
1865	1863 2d Model	97,577		60	.58
1866	Allin 1865 alt.	5,005			do.
1867	Allin 1866 alt.	49,257		320	.50
1868	do.	1,746		104	do.
1869	do.	1,296			do.
"	Springfield 1868	15,482	3	2	do.
1870	do.	36,651	1	310	do.
"	(B)Springfld 1870	550			do.
1871	Springfield 1868	2,016		4 O.M.S.	do.
"	Springfield 1870	2,372	341+ 20	(A) 3,091	do.
"	Ward-Burton	4	1		do.
1872	Springfield 1870	8,110		1 O.M.S.	do.
	Ward-Burton	1,011	316		do.
1873	Springfield 1870	501	1	1 O.M.S.	do

### SPECIAL SERIAL NO. BLOCK MFR.--FOR SHOTGUNS 20 ga.

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>QTY</u>	<u>SER NO. BLOCK</u>
1880	2 models sub.	unnumbered
1881	251	1-251
1882	375	252-626
1883	250	527-876
1885	500	877-1376

### SPECIAL UNNUMBERED PROD. RIFLES

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>MODEL</u>	<u>CAL.</u>	<u>QTY</u>
1875	Lee SS	.45	143
1879	Hotchkiss rifle	do.	513
"	Hotchkiss carbine	do.	501
"	Hotchkiss rifle(USN)	do.	1205
1880	Hotchkiss USN R.	do.	297
1881	do.	do.	999
1884	Chaffee-Reece R.	do.	753
1890	Springfield '88-90	.30CBP	1
1892	"	.30NC S	13 Lettered not numbered--A through M
1893	"	do.	1

#### NOTES:

A. This lot of cadet rifles is actually a Model of 1869 referring to the actual Model date and is serially numbered continuously with 1868 series.

B. All models of 1870 were considered trial arms and not serially numbered.

C. Pistols made on 1868 frames were not serially numbered and a total of only