

THE ITALIAN "VENDITTI" PISTOL

By Marcello Terenzi



MARCELLO TERENZI

1847/1850. As you know, the Americans begin the war against Mexico.

This is the time when American plans the invasion of Cuba, the time of the gold rush, the rush of the miners towards the West and of the Indian problem.

The muzzle-loading single-shot guns are now outdated, in view of the requirements of a war carried out on more modern criteria.

The manufacturers are on the look-out for new solutions to offer the Army in exchange for commercial supremacy.

It is in these circumstances that an eclectic American inventor, Walter Hunt becomes interested in a new percussion cartridge system, producing a number of prototypes of military calibre to be applied to the muzzle-loading guns supplied to the Army, prior to a suitable modification.

In the meantime, he also worked on a breach-loading gun of repeater type, with a tubular magazine located under the barrel. The "Volitional Repeater" - as the weapon was called - was supplied with twelve cartridges which a piston, pressed by a spring, pushed, one by one, towards a lifter, which forced them into the cartridge chamber.

It was 1848. This was the year which went down in history as the beginning of the story of the Winchester, the gun at the basis of the American firearms industry.

In the same year, the Hunt patents were bought up by a dealer gunsmith, G. A. Arrowsmith who in 1849, thanks to the ingenious idea of one of his workers Lewis Jennings, perfected the Hunt system of arming.

Arrowsmith sold the patents to the partners Horace Smith and B. Daniel Wesson in search of novelties which would enable them to undermine the supremacy of the Colt.

They did not immediately make use of the new patents acquired, but tried to beat Colt in his own field, bringing out a 1837 patent of Edward Wesson, brother of Daniel. Colt cut short their ambitious aims.

So that at this point the partners were all out to move in new directions.

It was no chance, I think, which led Wesson in 1851 to London, where the International Firearms Exhibition was being held; and it is there, in all probability, that the industrialist was surprised to see, already perfected in the "Venditti" pistol, the rudimentary attempts of Hunt. Handsome and technically advanced, the outcome of years of experience and on the market from some eight years previously, the Italian weapon very probably suggested the idea which was to enable him to outdo Colt in the race to commercial success.

For a meeting on American soil, I considered it opportune and perhaps interesting to speak briefly of a weapon which, curiously enough, concerns to an equal extent our two countries.

This is of course your "Volcanic" and our Venditti."

Here is a brief introduction to the economic facts arising from the historic situation in American and in Italy is perhaps necessary if we are to understand the paths followed by our respective gunsmiths, to arrive at the production of a weapon which, undoubtedly, has left profound innovating marks on history, even if its effects were completely reversed in the two countries. For, whilst in Italy the historic moment and the events connected to it did not permit the development of an original idea, in America the same idea, perhaps not completely original, progressed, favoured by the economic interests bound up with the historical situation.

However, this does not deprive the inventors of equal merit and equal glory.

Smith worked out practically at Norwich his partner's ideal, making use of his long experience in the production of guns and muskets and having recourse above all to that innovation to the loading mechanism of the gun which Jennings planned in 1849. Thus in 1851, the "Jennings" rifle is born.

The partners simplified still further the system of arming, replacing the ring with a lever. The latter mechanism was applied to a new weapon, the "S. W." pistol, which contains a tubular cartridge chamber under the barrel, suitable for containing Hunt's "rocket-balls" and boasting, further, the innovation of the primer incorporated and coaxial to the percussion-pin, which passed through the breech-block.

In 1858, the "S.W." extended its production to guns also, where the trigger guard hinged on to one end and with a fixed ring on the other end, acted as arming lever.

The weapon was loaded through a cut-out under the central body of the muzzle, communicating with the cartridge chamber, and was called the "Volcanic."

In the meantime, in Italy, while Hunt was proceeding to his first experiments, on the outskirts of Salerno, a certain Venditti of Lancusi was producing - it is thought from as far back as 1843 - a weapon having the same characteristics as the "Volcanic," with similar bullets to those of Hunt.

Pietro Venditti worked at Lancusi in the Assembly Works there, however it is supposed he was not of local origin. There are no records at the municipal registry office and no indication at the cemetery, so that it is practically impossible to obtain certain information on families from that part.

Local opinions are two. The first is that Venditti originated from Meggiano, another branch of Torre Annunziata and that, in any case, as a dependent of this Bourbon industry, he had come to Lancusi and had lived there for long years, together with Geremia Nistri and Ignazio Barbuti and finally with Gaetano Papa. During his leisure time, then, it is thought that he devoted himself to the planning of the semi-automatic pistol which bears his name.

The second, perhaps more probable opinion, which incidentally is confirmed by Ermanno Papa, has it that Venditti was a Swiss expert in mechanics, working for the cotton industry of Swiss initiative which was set up at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Fratte (Salerno), importing from Switzerland both the machinery and organization, capital and above all specialized labour.

The name Venditti could be an Italianization of Van Dick, this being a not uncommon proceeding. Suffice it to recall the famous painter of the XVIII century who worked at Naples, Gaspare Vanvitelli, whose original name was Van Wittel.

Venditti, traditionally recalled as an exuberant and turbulent type of man, tiring of the frames of the cotton mills, left this cotton industry after some years and, finding in the neighborhood a numerous and skillful colony of gunsmiths, who professed an art he felt more congenial to him, found employment at the Royal Assembly Works, where he was able to specialize and perfect himself in this new field.

Thus he was able to complete his pistol which was produced and perfected in that workshop, between Lancusi and Penta, still in existence today and which still uses the hand-operated fly-wheel, in wood, which served to drive the grinder.

However, Venditti after a quarrel with certain locals, in the course of a brawl killed - perhaps with his pistol - one of his opponents, so that he was condemned and imprisoned. Only after several years was he released, on bail by the owners of the cotton mill, who obtained permission from the King to hold him in custody and use him, meanwhile, for the mechanical requirements of the spinning mill.

After working his term of punishment, however, Venditti once more left the cotton mill and moved to Torre Annunziata, where he set up a company together with Raffaele Papa (brother of Gaetano) and with a Frenchman named Puthod, for the production on industrial scale of his pistol.

The company did not last long, breaking up shortly afterwards. Puthod devoted himself to other activities, while Papa went out to America to work in a safe factory; all trace is lost thereafter of Venditti.

Another contemporary and collaborator of Venditti was the gunsmith Ignazio Barbuti, whose son Bartolo emigrated to America in 1830.

So that it is not improbable that the idea of the pistol was imported into America, first of all by Bartolo Barbuti and later on by Raffaele Papa.

The "Venditti" was protected by a Bourbon patent in the year 1848, the same year in which Hunt brought out his "rocket-ball" cartridge.

Attempts have been made to justify the phenomenon as a parallel and independent coexistence; however this hypothesis does not hold good, since the "Venditti" and the "Volcanic" were exactly identical.

Then polemics arose as to the priority of the invention, which continued for long years.

Although the final proof, in the form of an attested manuscript does not exist, widespread opinion would have it that the merit should go to the Italians.

However this may be, it is interesting to consider the progression of certain indicative data.

1830. Bartolo Barbuti, son of Ignazio Barbuti, one of Venditti's first collaborators, and himself also a gunsmith, emigrates to America.

The following is an as yet unpublished synoptic table of the gunsmiths of Lancusi

Bernardino Dauria	(1780-1850)
Michele Dauria	Date Unknown
Vito Dauria	(1812-1882)
Ignazio Barbuti	(1790-1864)
Bartolo Barbuti	(1810-1898)
Raffaele Barbuti	(1818-1890)
Ignazio Barbuti	(1902-to date)

Jannone (related with the Barbutis and still gunsmiths in Salerno)

Antonio Ruggero	(1853-1925)
Vincenzo Ruggero	(1901-to date)

Giovanni Papa	(1818-1901) (worked in the Assembly Works)
Giovanni Papa, II	(1847-1918)
Gaetano Papa	(1846-1895)
Raffaele Papa	(1855-1924)
Ermanno Papa	(1900-to date)

1843. Many of those who have considered this problem think it certain that at this date Venditti had brought out the famous pistol, whose characteristics are identical to those we will find, some years later, in the "Volcanic."

The weapon is entirely hand-made; its shape is a typical Italian one, with a curved butt (an important detail).

1847-1848. Walter Hunt produces his "rocket-ball," very similar in concept to the Venditti cartridge, and applies it to a rifle which he patents in 1849, of repeater type and with a tubular cartridge chamber under the barrel. The mechanism is identical in every detail to that of the Italian weapon.

At the same period in which Hunt proceeded to his first experiments in this field, we already have a patent issued for the "Venditti system," that is, the pistol with cartridge chamber under the barrel, and more than two additional side chambers. So that, while in America we are still at the stage of experiments and groping steps forward, in Italy a "system" already exists as such.

In this connection, it is interesting to remark that, on the barrel of the Venditti pistol having a single cartridge chamber, we find engraved "Venditti & C. Lancusi;" whilst on the more rare triple-chamber type, we have the words "Venditti system," and note a circular punch with crown and sword, with the initials "T. A.," probably Torre Annunziata.

1851. At London the International Firearms Exhibition is held, with the participation, on a Bourbon patent, of the Venditti-Papa production. It is taken as a fact — as already mentioned — that Wesson was also present at the exhibition.

In the same year the two American partners start work at Norwich on the mass production of the "Volcanic."

These facts should suffice to fully back up the hypothesis of the Italian priority, even if we refrain from adding further considerations, certain of which are indicative, others extremely pertinent.

And the name of the American gun "Volcanic" is allusive, as it were a homage rendered by Smith and Wesson to Vesuvius, symbol of the country which gave birth to the masterly idea which was to enable it to compete with its direct opponent, the Colt.

Moreover, all the Venditti pistols are hand-worked on an artisan basis; while even the oldest type of "Volcanic" is milled. The artisan creates, and the manufacturers mass-produce on data acquired from artisan experience.

The oldest type of "Volcanics" have a rounded butt, which is not a typical American shape, but rather of European and Italian origin.

So that it is unquestionable that the name of Venditti would have deserved greater glory; but several factors have obscured this name. Perhaps this was partly due to his nature and the adventurous life he lived; perhaps the years he spent in prison completely deprived for a certain period of his civil rights, so that others were able to make use of his patent. In any case, I think, even if conditions had been favorable, he would undoubtedly not have developed the commercial flair of a Wesson or a Colt. Within certain limits, but undoubtedly more inspired, he could be compared to Walter Hunt.

The fact is — however this maybe — that among the famous names of Winchester, Smith, Wesson and Hunt, in the story of guns, Venditti of the Royal Assembly Works of Lancusi deserves a place of equal honor.

Today still, many cartridge chamber pistols testify to our artisan in homes in and around Salerno.

To what extent the Venditti gun can boast its priority over American models is difficult to establish; however the decisive contribution the gunsmith made to a new revolutionary weapon (the Winchester rifle) is unquestionable.

The destruction of the Bourbon Royal Archives during the last World War prevents us, in the light of present knowledge, to document in a spectacular way his suspected priority.

However the term "suspected" is mild. For there are numerous data, facts and considerations indicating the "Venditti" pistol as an older weapon than the "Volcanic," even if — as we pointed out at the beginning — we possess very slight documented information on our gunsmith.

The reason for the lack of success of the Italian weapon is to be sought in the historic period which saw the Kingdom of Naples wane, and with it the long tradition of the production of firearms, which had known better days under Charles III and Ferdinand IV.

The Royal Works of Torre Annunziata, which for dozens of years boasted an excellent paternity in the development of firearms, followed the same fate, and — together with it — the ancient building in Piazza Regina, the "Assembly Works of Lancusi," "The Monteria," a branch of the Royal Works, together with that of Maggiano.

In its last period, the "Assembly Works" was an enormous old building, directed by Col. Buonocore.

The enlightened plans of the reigning monarch had included the derivation of water from Acerno. According to the Bourbon king's plans, the springs many of which already feed the water pipelines of Salernitano would have been deviated along the Valley of Calvanico and, after reaching Lancusi and being used for all the requirements of the Royal Assembly Works, directed into the Valley of San Severino, would finally have run into the Irno River.

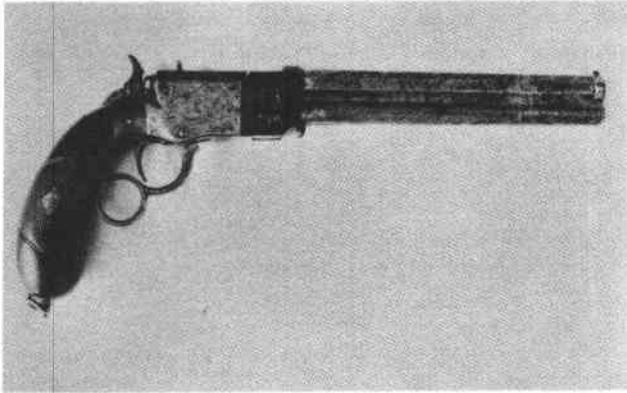
Such a realization which would have had a great industrial usefulness and would have done much to valorise the "Assembly Works of Lancusi," was never put into effect, however, on account of the turn events took, and of the sabotage of the abovementioned Col. Buonacore.

In the basements of the building the numerous compartments for the individual forgings are still visible on the walls, as also are the remains of the suction cowls, acid baths, etc.

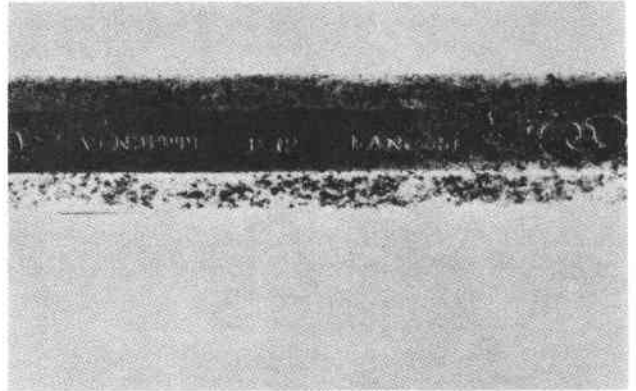
With the end of the Bourbons, the Royal Assembly Works closed its doors, and remained idle until the last years of the century.

The locks and all other finishing work was done in Lancusi; while the butts, most of which were made of horses' shoe iron, if not produced at Torre or at the Royal Works, were ordered from the centers of Cesinali or Pregiato.

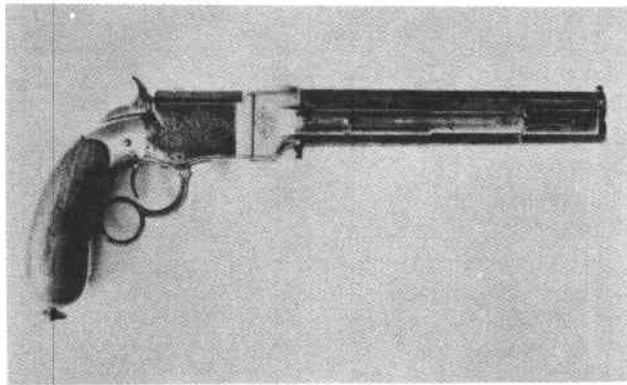
Once the Bourbon Works closed, local labor was diverted towards other parallel activities.



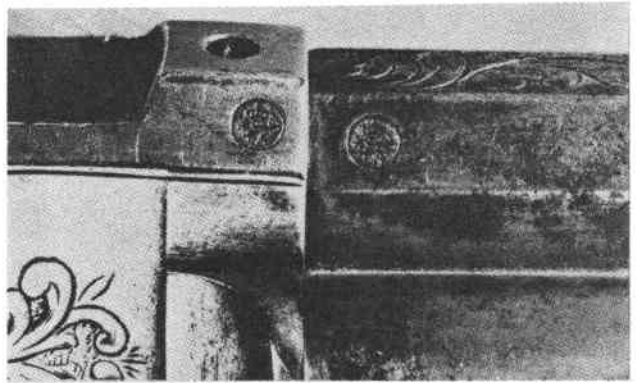
SINGLE SHOT VENDITTI PISTOL



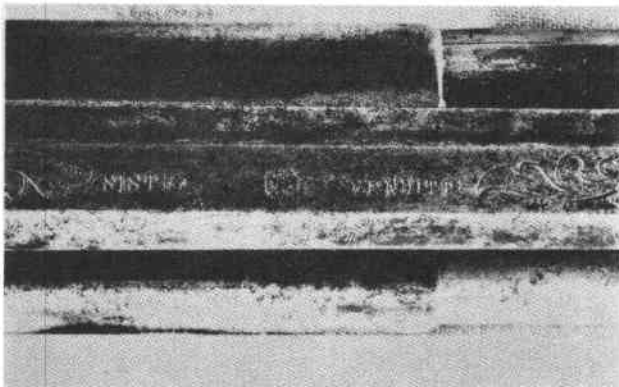
BARREL MARKING SINGLE SHOT PISTOL "VENDITTI & C., LANCUST"



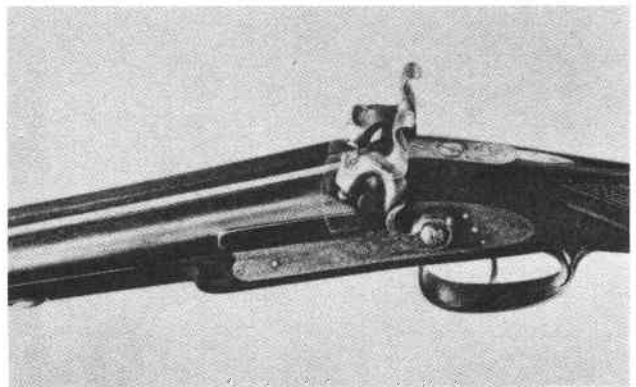
VENDITTI THREE SHOT PISTOL



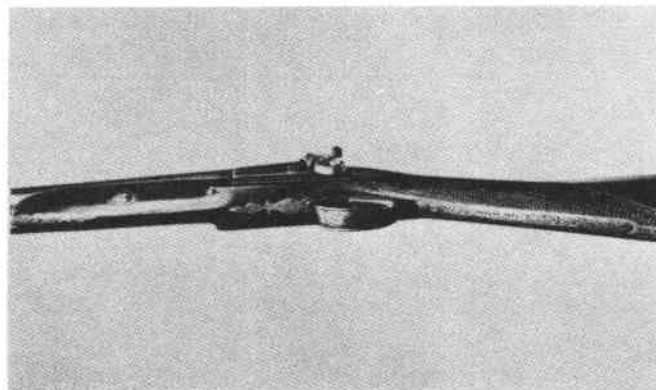
CIRCULAR PUNCH WITH CROWN & SWORD ON THREE SHOT PISTOL



BARREL MARKING ON THREE SHOT PISTOL, "SYSTEM VENDITTI"



GAETANO PAPA SHOTGUN



GAETANO PAPA SHOTGUN (BOTTOM VIEW)

Thus the tradition which saw the birth artistically at Avellino of a Michele Battista, was fully capable of supporting that of a Venditti or of a Gaetano Papa from Lancusi, half a century later.

In the whole area around Salerno, we have witnessed the flourishing of small and large public or private companies, connected to the production of weapons; so that it is no hard task for us to make a comparison — at a distance of a century and a half — with the situation of Bresciano under XVII century Venice.

In fact, historically also, the political and military importance had shifted, though with no less showy glory, towards Napoletano, at the decline of the hegemony of the "Serenissima."

EDITOR'S NOTE . . .

If your picture was taken at the New Orleans meeting and it does not appear in this Bulletin blame it on the Official Photographer. He tried out a new camera and lens and goofed plenty. Should this again happen at a later date your Editor will have to replace him or cut his salary. Sorry 'bout that.