

# ADVENTURES IN PURSUIT OF OLD GUNS

By James E. Serven



JAMES E. SERVEN

Thank you, Mr. President. Such kind words always fall pleasantly on the ear, deserved or not.

This is the first time I have been asked to speak on "All Fools Day." I hope the selection of the day and the speaker have no significance.

Every speaker tells his audience how happy he is to be with them, but in my case that feeling is very genuine. Many of you are long-time friends and it is always more enjoyable to address a friendly, knowledgeable audience.

Now that we have satisfied our thirst and hunger I would hope that you can now sit back and relax comfortably. I promise to make this vocal visit relatively short. Certainly I would not wish any of the lovely ladies present to suffer the discomfort of those distressed women we see on television who complain "My girdle is killing me!"

I could ramble on at considerable length about gun collecting and to prevent this I shall stick to the pages before me.

There are many here this evening who have had experiences as interesting as mine, or perhaps even more exciting, and I would much prefer to listen to their experiences than to recount my own. But here in this great national capitol there seems to be a strong adherence to the seniority system, regardless of other qualifications.

I believe your program chairman thought that after forty years of gun collecting I must certainly have experienced some thrilling moments and amusing situations. Perhaps he also thought that these events might give some insight into the great potentials in gun collecting and might in some measure reveal to the ladies why we men find this hobby so fascinating.

While I was interested in guns in a "cowboy and Indians" sort of way early in life, it was not until 1926 that the notion to collect occurred to me. At that time, somewhat reluctantly, I bought an almost mint, round barrel Colt Navy pistol for \$3.00.

Shortly after this earth-shaking purchase a struggling artist asked me to accept some old pistols in lieu of cash to settle a bill he owed our lumber company. I paid his bill and took the pistols. That made me almost a collector.

The next few years were very busy ones for me with little time for a hobby, but in late 1931 I took a a sabbatical leave from formal business, spending much of the following year in the delightful Catskill Mountain village of Woodstock, New York. Now there was time for a hobby and for some of the free-lance writing I had long wanted to do.

Early in 1932 I heard of a gentleman named P. C. Cowles in Waterbury, Connecticut, who wished to sell a collection of antique pistols. So I drove over to Waterbury, and upon arriving there found a group of nice U. S. martial pistols, many Civil War revolvers, a lot of Philadelphia derringers, and other desirable pistols — about 300 in all. Mr. Cowles wanted \$6 apiece. In those days, following the market crash of 1929, you didn't part with \$1800 without some second thoughts. However, the collection seemed like a bargain to me until the owner said, "You'll have to take those long guns over there in the corner at the same price."

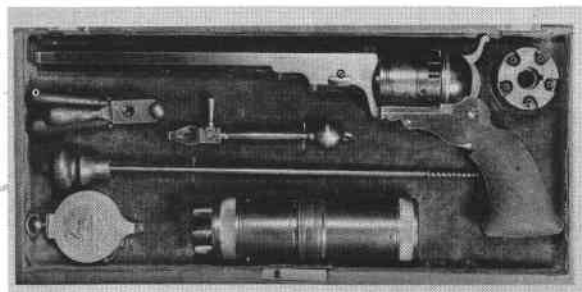
In my ignorance I was then not at all interested in bulky shoulder arms especially since I was temporarily residing in a rented studio. But I finally agreed to take the long guns. I had given these pieces scarcely a glance, but when I got them home I found some fine Sharps rifles, two engraved Volcanic carbines and among other nice pieces an almost mint engraved Henry rifle which had been presented to an army officer by the U. S. Government! That one piece today would bring far more than I paid for the entire collection.

On this, my first adventure into buying a gun collection, dame fortune was very kind to me. Subsequently I found that you had to give that fickle lady some help.

Having heard that a crazy fellow from over in the Catskill Mountains at Woodstock was throwing his money around, an old-time collector named E. W. Adt of Torrington, Connecticut, wrote to suggest that I look at his pistol collection. His description of the pistols was tempting — all Colts and U. S. martial pistols. So my Woodstock friend from the American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin contacted me and came home with 346 more choice antique small arms at a price per piece not much above the Waterbury guns/articles/  
Additional articles available at <http://www.armscollectors.com/bulletin/342834>



PROBABLY THE FIRST PRODUCTION PISTOL TO BEAR THE COLT NAME, THIS IS SERIAL NUMBER 1 AND MADE AT PATERSON, N.J. IT WAS UNCOVERED IN A BROOKLYN FLAT AND PURCHASED FOR \$35.



MANUFACTURED AT PATERSON N.J. THIS BEAUTIFUL COLT PISTOL WAS SHIPPED TO IRELAND AND LATER CARRIED TO CANADA.

Connecticut was good to me in those early days. A short time later I bought a Colt sidehammer pistol with Charter Oak stock which a lady had found in the cupboard of an old house she had bought and remodelled. She insisted \$15 was a fair price.

These prices, of course, seem ridiculous to us today but what about today's prices in relation to those 10, 20 or 30 years from now? If a Flemish painting that has done nothing more important than hang on a wall will command a price of a million dollars, what will be the value of a beautiful firearm that is steeped in our national history?

After the purchase of the Cowles and Adt collections you might say I was "up to my waist" in guns. Not long after this I decided to spend the winter in Arizona. So I selected the pieces I wanted to keep and asked Dick Short to place an advertisement in the American Rifleman and sell the others.

Despite the great economic depression of that time, the guns sold like hot cakes, and I then had concrete evidence that not only were old guns a great part of our national history and a source of recreational enjoyment but that collecting them was economically sound.

The winter on a ranch in Arizona convinced me that Arizona was the place I wanted to live, but

the move was not immediately possible. Again I rented a studio for the summer at Woodstock and, when I could, renewed my search for old guns. Among other things I placed some "wanted" ads in the newspapers, hobby and gun magazines, and in farm papers such as the Rural New Yorker.

It was about this time that I met a number of other collectors, notably men like John and Harry Lunn, Bill Luce, Howard Rulison, Tony Fidd, John Laidacker and Dr. Leo Brady — all living in or not very far from Ithaca, New York. With them and others I was one of the organizers of the Eastern Arms Collectors Association, the name now changed to New York State Arms Collectors Association. Advices from men in this group led to many interesting purchases, including the Dr. J. M. Scrafford collection at Syracuse, one of the fine collections featured in the gun books by that famous pioneer collector and author, Charles Winthrop Sawyer.

I found fellow collectors a very fine and helpful group of men. I was having a lot of fun, too. I had traded Roy Vail of Warwick, New York, a Chinese rug for a ship model and then traded the ship model to an eager ship model collector in Kingston for a small collection of old pistols which included a fine matched pair of ivory inlaid wheel locks.

My remaining days of residence in New York state brought with them further pleasant experiences, but in 1935 I made the big move to Arizona and purchased a small cattle ranch south of Tucson.

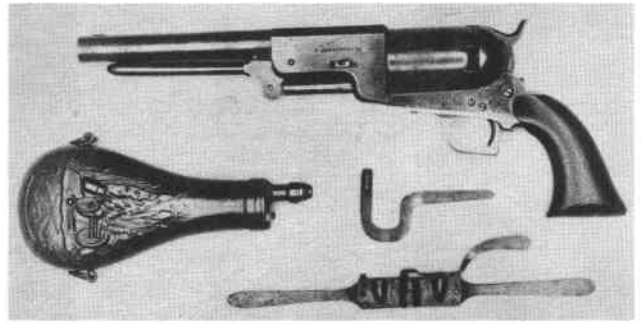
I had purchased all Dr. J. M. Scrafford's surplus arms before leaving New York, and very soon after I arrived in Arizona I completed negotiations to purchase his main collection of 448 pistols. When I went to pick up about ten shipping boxes at the Tucson express office, two U. S. Marshals suddenly appeared and wanted to know why a rancher needed so many guns. It seems there had been some trouble with gun running into Mexico and my ranch was only an hour's drive from the border. I showed them the contents of one box — all flintlock pistols — and thereafter had no trouble with the law.



EIGHT OF THE FOURTEEN PATERSON COLTS IN THE 1500 PIECE ALBERT FOSTER JR. COLLECTION.



THE AUTHOR CAUGHT UP WITH THIS FINE WALKER COLT PISTOL NEAR ANGEL'S CAMP IN CALIFORNIA'S MOTHER LODE COUNTRY. IT WAS HANGING OVER THE BACK-BAR OF A TAVERN - - BUT NOT FOR LONG!



KNOWN AS THE "PULHAMUS" WHITNEYVILLE WALKER COLT, THIS FAMOUS PISTOL WAS PURCHASED FROM A DESCENDANT OF AN EARLY COLT WORKMAN. THE NIPPLE WRENCH ALONE RECENTLY BROUGHT A HIGHER PRICE AT AUCTION THAN THE COST OF THE PISTOL AND ACCESSORIES IN THE 1940s.

During the five years I lived on my Sonoita ranch I made frequent trips to the East and in the process bought some important collections. One was the O. J. Bierly collection, on loan at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. In the process of my increased collecting activity I had met a number of gentlemen whose friendship has been among my greatest rewards in this hobby. Among these early friends were Carl Metzger and our President Emeritus Harry Knode, both of Dallas. Carl and Harry were close friends and Harry has been responsible for the excellent display of the Metzger collection at Texas A & M University. Carl Metzger provided the encouragement that led me to write my Colt book. Harry can remember when we struggled in Carl's gunroom to take gun photographs with an old 3A Kodak. You might say that Harry has advanced somewhat in photography since then.

When Carl Metzger heard I was going east to buy the Bierly collection of about 1,000 pistols he asked to go with me. I picked him up in Dallas and we drove toward Texarkana where we planned to stay the night. I had a man to see about a gun along our route and when we reached this man's residence in East Texas Carl decided he would wait in the car. In about a half hour I came back to the car with a cardboard box under my arm. Carl had a high-pitched Texas drawl and turned it up to inquire, "What in blazes took you so long?" I assured him the box contained a nice pepperbox pistol (a type then selling for about \$15). "Good Lord," Carl exploded, "If it takes you that long to buy a pepperbox, how long would it take you to buy a Paterson?"

"Well, it's a nice pepperbox," I replied. "Take a look." Reluctantly Carl opened the box and when he did his voice hit high C! What he found was a beautiful Paterson Colt, cased with all accessories!

This was an auspicious start for what turned out to be a most enjoyable trip, and with one of the finest gentlemen I have ever known.

Our route to Pittsburgh took us through Kentucky. One night we checked in at a hotel in Bowling Green and having nothing else to do we inquired if there were any gun collectors in town. We were assured that indeed there was one. An hour later found us in the local undertaking parlor, quite alive, and being escorted through several somewhat macabre work rooms in which guns decorated all the walls. Finally, after this guided tour, during which the history of each gun was recited, our enthusiastic undertaker friend took us into his private office and with an air of great pride withdrew from his safe a small derringer pistol. "This little gem," he assured us, "was in the pocket of the minister who married Abraham Lincoln!" A derringer wedding was a new one to us, but we took it in stride.

Next our host, with glowing enthusiasm took from the safe his greatest prize. It was just about the rustiest Remington .44 cap and ball pistol we had ever seen. "This pistol," he told us, "was carried by a great confederate general who was leading a charge across the river when he was shot from his horse and his pistol lost. Only recently it was recovered." Pointing to the pistol he said reverently, "This is the original rust." Two years later I bought the gentleman's entire collection, stories, rust and all.

Although I had had tentative agreement on the price of the Bierly collection before going to Pittsburgh it took an all-night session and two bottles of Gibson's Rye to get the bill of sale finally signed. Mr. Bierly was a very remarkable man — a big, rugged policeman with very little formal schooling. But he had a sense for fine things, getting together, in addition to the pistols, important collections of china, hand-woven coverlets and other antique items. He lived into advanced age. I suspect he had one hollow leg and a cast iron stomach.

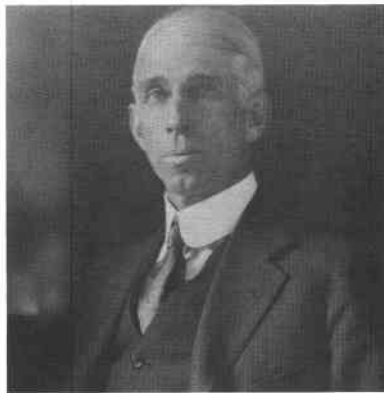
Carl Metzger and I packed most of the Bierly guns for shipment to Arizona and took a few of the outstanding pieces with us to display at the first Ohio Gun Show either of us had attended. This was in Columbus and the year was late 1939 or early 1940. There we met Henry Stewart and Dr. Buck of Pennsylvania, Sam Smith of Wisconsin (then on his honeymoon) and of course a number of the prominent Ohio collectors like Bud Shumaker.



ALBERT FOSTER JR., AN OFFICIAL OF THE COLT COMPANY.



CHARLES WINTHROP SAWYER, THE PIONEER IN AUTHORIZING GUN BOOKS.



CHARLES COOK (1872-1937) WAS ONE OF THE TRULY GREAT ARMS COLLECTORS OF HIS TIME.



MAJOR WILLIAM G. RENWICK, A TUSCON NEIGHBOR AND CLOSE FRIEND OF AUTHOR SERVEN.

The purchase of the Bierly guns set off a chain reaction, and soon thereafter I was invited to purchase the extensive Ault collection down the river from Pittsburgh at Martin's Ferry. While there Father Kloss, a genial Catholic priest, decided he, too, would sell his gun collection. I still hear from him occasionally. He used the money to send two nephews through college. On top of that, the director of a museum in nearby Wheeling urged me to accept a nice big Virginia Manufactory flintlock pistol in trade for some antique bottles which were among the incidentals in the Ault collection. To this day I do not know who got the better of that trade, but we both were happy and I guess that is one of the best ways to judge a trade.

In 1940 I had an attractive offer for my ranch and cattle, so I sold and moved to Santa Ana, California. Although I bought a home in that orange-grove surrounded city I also purchased a small ranch near San Juan Capistrano and had my horses shipped over from Arizona.

I had hardly gotten settled in California before an outstanding collection of about 45 cased pairs of duelling pistols and many almost mint uncased pistols were offered by a very wealthy family in San Marino. This started a long succession of purchases up and down the West Coast.

Some of my most interesting California experiences were had along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in an area known as the Mother Lode Country. Up near Angel's Camp in Bret Harte and Mark Twain country, where they hold the famous jumping frog contest each year, I bought a nice small collection and hauled it to the motor freight dock in nearby San Andreas for shipment to Santa Ana. While there the agent said, "You ought to go up to that gin mill near Hathaway Pines. They must have 500 old pistols on the wall behind the bar."

I had heard stories like that before and Hathaway Pines was up the mountain and well off my planned route, so I let it pass. About a year later, however, I was in that area and decided I would investigate. The gin mill in question turned out to be a log cabin tavern with one big room in front where the bar was located and small living quarters in the back. It was dark in there and when I got up to the bar I saw about 50 "Saturday-night specials" worth \$2 apiece wired to chicken wire stretched across the wall above the back-bar. I thought, "What the hell, I'll have a drink anyway." As I slowly downed the drink my eyes became better accustomed to the dim light and suddenly I saw something close to the ceiling that gave me a start. It had to be a Walker Colt!

I struck up a conversation with the tavern owner and asked if he would like to see some old guns I had in the car. He was quite interested. I chanced to have several pairs of very cute little flintlock derringers with me. Presently his wife came into the bar and fell in love with those little pistols. To make a long story short, I left with the Walker, leaving him the small pistols and a Colt Dragoon. He told me that the Walker pistol had been found in a safe after the death of an old Chinese merchant. He claimed that he hated to part with this particular pistol because he sometimes used it to shoot squirrels. When I had a chance to examine the pistol in good light I found all the chambers fully loaded. The verdigris-covered lead balls must have been there for 50 years!

The sheriff of Calaveras County where this Walker Colt was found had his home and office in San Andreas. We became good friends. One day he took me over to his house and showed me a very clean Texas Paterson Colt pistol. He didn't care to sell it right then he told me because it was given to him by an old man whom he had befriended just before the old man died.

I told the sheriff, a big raw-boned man who was well known for his toughness up there in the Mother Lode country, that if he should



change his mind I would pay him a certain figure. A year went by and one day the express man brought a package to my door. In it was the Texas Paterson pistol. No note. Nothing. I immediately sent a check for the amount I had suggested earlier. Still no word but the check was cashed. When I saw the sheriff some months later he was quite satisfied and said: "We had an understanding. When I trust a man, I trust him." That was the kind of man Joe Zwinge was.

Another time in back country not far from San Andreas I called on a farmer who was said to have some guns. He had a long porch across the front of his house devoid of any railing. It was evident that the chickens roosted there frequently and the only place to sit was on several broken down chairs and a big wooden chest.

The farmer was very noncommittal about owning any guns, and we talked about crops, the weather, and a few other irrelevant things for about an hour until he was satisfied as to my identity and purpose. Finally he said, "Yep, I've got some old guns I'll sell. Get up off that chest and I'll show 'em to you." He had some good and rare pieces, too, but not for long.

While these Mother Lode trips were filled with interesting and rewarding experiences, purchase and redistribution among my collector friends of the Albert Foster, Jr. collection must be regarded as a high spot in my collecting, and a privilege for which I shall always be deeply grateful. I knew this was one of the country's truly great collections but I was not prepared to find 14 Paterson Colts, a closet full of cased Colt pistols stacked up like cordwood and a total of 1500 top quality arms, not to mention accessories, books, catalogs, etc. Added pleasure from this transaction has been in the continuing friendship with Mrs. Foster and her son Lindsley, and with Mrs. Foster's attorney John Watson, a prominent collector in his own right.

I can claim no great sagacity in acquiring the Foster collection, or many others. It was merely being at the right place at the right time with the right price.

The Charles Cook collection was another great milestone in my collecting experience. Mr. Cook was one of the foremost collectors of his day and, as in the case of the Scrafford collection, the Cook collection was a major source for illustrations and data in the early gun books authored by Charles W. Sawyer.

When I attended Brown University at Providence, the fraternity house where I lived on Manning Street was but a few blocks from Mr. Cook's large home on Waterman Street. If he had had some pretty daughters I might have met him at that time, my interests then being somewhat foreign to gun collecting. But I never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Cook.

The great stature of the Cook collection became known to me soon after I began to take collecting seriously. Most collectors of that day regarded Mr. Cook with a sort of reverent awe. He was a fine gentleman and the ideal of a successful student of American arms. At first it was just a nice dream, but eventually purchase of the Cook collection became a reality.

It seemed to me that great collections like the Scrafford, Bierly, Foster, Andrews and Cook collections were worthy of a special catalog, with bound copies going to the former owner or his heirs. Those who have plain copies of these catalogs today seem to treasure them, too.

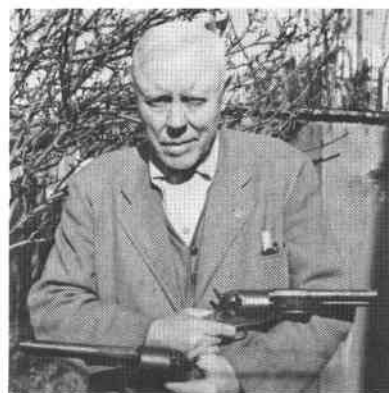
Probably some of my most exciting experiences involved rare Walker and Paterson Colt pistols. I mentioned earlier that friends in the collecting field had been very helpful. Here is an outstanding example: One day I called on Harold Young at his shop in Nutley, New Jersey, and bought a few unimportant Colt pistols. Harold specialized in military arms. He told me that there was a man



"SINGLE SHOT" SAM SMITH STARTED OFF RIGHT BY TAKING HIS BRIDE TO A GUN SHOW ON THEIR HONEYMOON.



CAPTAIN FRED CLARKE, AN ARDENT GUN COLLECTOR AND A POLICE OFFICER.



JOSEPH GNAOU, A KEEN COLLECTOR FROM SAN FRANCISCO.



CARL METZGER (LEFT) AND HARRY KNODE (RIGHT) DEMONSTRATE THAT SOMETIMES THEY HUNTED FOR OTHER THINGS THAN OLD GUNS.

living in Paterson whose father had worked in the Colt Paterson factory. Harold had been up to see this man several times but never could find him at home. "You are especially interested in Colts," Harold said, "Here's the address. Maybe you'll have better luck."

Paterson was on my route home, so I stopped in at the address given and was delighted to be greeted by an elderly gentleman who assured me that he did have an old Colt pistol. He went upstairs and brought down a big cardboard box. When he opened the lid I had a pleasant shock. There was the most beautiful Walker Colt I had ever seen, along with the original nipple wrench and bullet mould! It seems that the pistol had belonged to Aaron Pulhamus, this gentleman's father, who worked not only at the Paterson factory but also at Whitneyville when Colt's Walker models were made there. Needless to say, I made haste to purchase the pistol, later rewarding Harold Young generously for his unselfish lead.

Some of you may remember that I had the privilege to be the banquet speaker at the 1958 American Society meeting in Dallas. The theme of my talk at that time was "Are Antique Firearms a Good Investment." Fortunately, my affirmative conclusions have since been proven sound. Let me illustrate what has happened in the specific case of the Pulhamus Walker pistol which I have just mentioned. At a 1970 auction the nipple wrench brought more than I paid for the entire outfit, and the bullet mould alone brought considerably more than the price at which I sold the pistol and accessories to a prominent and very knowledgeable member of this society, whose friendship I have treasured over the years.

Another illustration of the value trend is that of a beautiful cased Paterson pistol which I purchased in Canada in the 1940s for \$1500. I sold the pistol for \$2000, bought it back for \$3500, sold it again at a profit and while I am not sure of the exact price paid by the present owner, a member of this society, I am confident it could not be purchased for ten times the price at which it was purchased in the 1940s.

Paterson Colts seem to have a way of turning up, creating hope, anxiety, and sometimes disappointments. One of my most aggravating and drawn-out experiences in the pursuit of a Paterson Colt involved a fine cased set in Germantown, Pennsylvania. The gentleman in residence there was a strange individual with a pointed beard. He was patronizingly cordial in showing me the pistol where it gathered dust on the top of an old bureau in his attic. For ten years thereafter, whenever I was in the area, I would inquire about the pistol, always receiving an amused but polite turn-down. The thing that really raised my blood pressure was that one Christmas this dog-in-the-manger character sent me a toy pistol!

But he who laughs last laughs best and one day when I telephoned, his wife answered. I explained the reason for my call. "Why that's my pistol," she exclaimed, "it was my father's." When I told her how much I would pay for the pistol she said, "You come right over and get it." Victory here was sweet, indeed!

Probably the most amazing incident came early in my collecting experience. As I have mentioned previously, I placed some "Wanted" ads in the Rural New Yorker. One of these ads inquired for Colt pistols made at Paterson, New Jersey. One day I received a very breezy letter from a man in Brooklyn who said that he had seen my ad and owned such a pistol — and, Oh yes, the only number he could find on it was Number 1. I had had my leg pulled a couple times by tempting tidbits, and was very suspicious. But one can't afford to ignore such a letter, so I wrote and asked for more specific information — possibly a picture. No answer.

Almost a year later I was in New York City for a few days on other business and I thought about that letter from Brooklyn. Having a free afternoon, I decided to go over to Brooklyn and satisfy myself that this pistol either existed or the letter had been a hoax.

Arriving at the address given, a modest brownstone flat, I was met by a middle-aged lady. She advised that her husband was not home, but when I explained the purpose of my visit she said, "Yes, he has an old pistol, and I wish he would get it out of the house!" She consented to show me the pistol.

Holding it gingerly between two fingers she laid a fine belt-model Paterson Colt pistol on the table beside me. With a rapidly increasing pulse I slipped out the wedge and removed the barrel. There it was — Serial Number 1. The other parts bore the same number. Trying to be nonchalant, I told her I would telephone her husband when he returned that evening.

I thought the intervening hours would never pass, but finally the time came and I made the call. A gruff voice answered the telephone. "Yes, I'll sell the pistol," the speaker told me, "but don't think you're gonna steal it!"

I assured the gentleman that such a thought was farthest from my mind. "Well, I'll not take a cent less than \$35," he declared firmly. I hope my gasp was not audible at the other end. Speechless for a moment, I groped for something to say. Thinking of nothing more relevant I recounted what a hard time I had experienced in finding his home that afternoon.

"Where are you staying?" he inquired. I told him the name of the hotel. "How long will you be there?" Well, I would have been there a week if necessary, but I quickly assured him I would be in all evening.

I must admit that my conscience bothered me somewhat after this transaction but I was certain that, considering the kind of man the owner was, I never would have obtained the pistol if I had aroused his suspicions by a much higher offer.

These are but a few of the highlights which have contributed to my enthusiasm for gun collecting. In the pursuit of this hobby one meets many interesting and wonderful people, builds firm friendships, gains knowledge which can often be turned to profitable investment, and new light is shed on our nation's history.

Speaking of light in a different sense, Thomas Edison was once introduced as not only the inventor of the light bulb but also the inventor of the first talking machine. Edison arose to reply and said: "It is not quite correct to say that I invented the first talking machine. I invented the first talking machine that you could turn off!"

On that note I shall turn off this talk, and wish to thank you very much for your patient attention.



DR. WILLIAM SAYBOLT ENJOYED HIS LONG ISLAND RETREAT WHERE HE KEPT ONE OF THE NATION'S TOP QUALITY COLLECTIONS OF KENTUCKY RIFLES.



GEORGE SMOOTS, OWNER OF THE FAR WEST HOBBY SHOP, ONE OF THE LEADING EARLY ARMS DEALERS ON THE WEST COAST.



DR. A. G. CLYNE BUILT A GREAT COLLECTION OF KENTUCKY RIFLES.



HAROLD YOUNG