

The 45-70 Trapdoor Springfield: A Personal Tribute

by Jonathan M. Peck

The lowly trapdoor Springfield was the official firearm of the U.S. services from 1865 to 1892. This discussion will be concerned only with the 45-70 Model 1873 and its variations through 1890. Since Archer Jackson covered the Officer's Model very well at an earlier meeting, it will not be included.

In the new book, Flayderman's Guide to *Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, published in 1977, the information that the collecting field has sorely needed is at last concisely edited by word and picture and is easily available for quick reference. Norm called on Mr. Burton Kellerstadt of New Britain, Connecticut, one of the foremost authorities on the Springfield Armory and its products, to write this section. Norm Flayderman deserves special recognition not only for the Springfield section, but also for the other sections detailing specific information. He picked the brains of 25 of us here in the Society to help him in various areas where we are specialists and he is not. I could not give this talk today without this information, and I give my warm and personal thanks to you, Norm Flayderman for a job well done. Special thanks also go to George Moller of Lakewood, Colorado, who loaned me many of the fine specimens you will see here.

Very little is known about Erskine Allin, the inventor of the Allin conversion which was later to become the 50-70 and then the 45-70, except that he spent his entire working life at Springfield Armory. He was born in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1809 and entered the Armory shop in 1829, rising to Foreman of the Watershop in 1842, from there to Clerk in (sic) the Ordinance Storekeeper in 1847, and finally Superintendent, in which position he remained until his death in 1879.

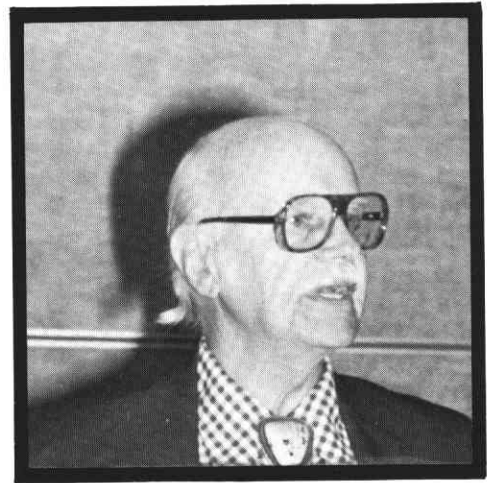
Let us now go to a brief study of the 45-70 Springfield, from the Model 1873 to the last of its variations, the Model 1890. These Models are:

1. The Model 1873: about 73,000 made from 1873 to 1877.
2. The Model 1877: about 7,500 made; with improvements in stock and receiver.
3. The "Model 1879": no such official designation, but 140,000 made with heavier receiver.
4. The Model 1882 Experimental (Model 1882 Short Rifle): only 52 pieces in two different types with 28" barrels.
5. The Model 1886 Experimental: 1,000 made with 24" barrel and other changes from the M1882.
6. The Model 1884: Did not get into production until 1887. Two types with sight and trigger guard changes, plus others.
7. The Model 1890 Carbine: no carbines made after 1884, but this is a major alteration in 1890 of front sight cover and band, applied to all previous models.
8. The Model 1880: triangular ramrod bayonet: first use of gun.
9. The Model 1881 Trapdoor Shotgun: M1889 action modified to take 20 ga. shot shells. Issued to hunters and scouts, two to a company.
10. The Model 1884 Experimental Rifle: standard '84 rifle with round ramrod bayonet and different front sight and cover.
11. The Model 1888 Ramrod Bayonet Rifle: variations in bayonet locking lugs.
12. The Model 1888 "Positive Cam" Experimental Rifle: takes play out of breech locking.
13. The Model 1873 with Metcalfe Cartridge Box: quick loading wood block for eight cartridges attached to right side of stock forward of lock plate.

These were the variations of the 45-70 Springfield trapdoor which, just a few years ago, was a nothing gun and now is a valuable collectable because it played such a vital part in the history of our country. I'll tell you about the part it played.

It was the lethal tool of the Indian fighter as well as the Indian himself when he could beg, borrow, or steal one. It could not be

Note: Mr. Peck gave many details of the various models of the 45-70 Springfield trapdoors in his talk, but technical difficulties made it impossible to use the reproductions of his slides. This account has therefore been abridged to include only a brief mention of those various models. It contains the whole of his non-technical material.



fired as rapidly as repeating shoulder arms like the seven-shot Spencer, used by Maj. Forsyth at the Battle of Beecher's Island in 1868, but it was less prone to misfires and the maximum range was 3500 yards, which rendered the bow and arrow and the less powerful repeating rifle of the Indian useless.

It was the favored weapon of the 9th and 10th Cavalry, otherwise known as the "Black Cavalry," whose soldiers, because of their kinky hair were called the "Buffalo Soldiers". This was the gun used when Geronimo was transferred from the reservation in Warm Springs to the reservation in New Mexico, which resulted in one of New Mexico's bloodiest conflicts. This same gun played a vital part in protecting the border between Texas and Mexico in the Red River wars. It was immortalized in Schreyvogel's painting, "Guarding the Canyon Pass".

This was the gun that was carried up San Juan Hill by reservists, again by the "Buffalo Soldiers", even though the Krag was then the official firearm. They were led by a little-known Captain by the name John J. Pershing, later General Pershing, Supreme Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces in WWI.

The Battle of Little Big Horn immortalized the 45/70. An arrogant, conceited fool named General George Armstrong Custer, and a brave Indian named "Crazy Horse". Custer, warned by his scouts of the danger ahead, ignored their warnings in his lust for fame and power and threw caution to the winds by leading a force of perhaps 600 men against an Indian force of over 2000 Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes led by "Crazy Horse". This was an Indian defense against a white man's attack, not an Indian ambush. Custer was so greedy to feed his ego that he sealed the doom of 250 of his men by pushing on against overwhelming odds, and fell right into Crazy Horse's trap. When reinforcements finally arrived, they stood in disbelief as they looked over the ravine strewn with the arrow-pierced carcasses of over 200 men--all that was left of the famous 7th Cavalry--including the commander.

Much has been written on Custer's last stand, and paintings and chromos have immortalized that battle, the most accurate of which is by Edgar Paxson in 1899 showing both sides using the Colt revolver and the Springfield 45/70 carbine.

This may not be the gun that "fired the shot heard 'round the world" but it sure is the next thing to it. Used by good guy, bad guy, hunter, rancher, Indian, Indian scout, and soldier, it earned its rightful place in history, particularly in the winning of the west.

Right now, that ugly looking gun is speaking to us, telling us that we at this moment are on hallowed ground in Indian territory. Now if you listen, and listen carefully, you may hear in the distance the yells and the warwhoops of the Indian fighters as they echo through these hills.

Gentlemen: I thank you for this opportunity to speak before this most erudite group and I also thank you for listening.