

Firearms Research: A Professional Approach

A Roundtable Discussion

Roy M. Marcot, Richard C. Marohn, M.D., and George D. Moller

Roy Marcot:

Webster's Dictionary defines research as a diligent investigation or examination of facts, but when research relates specifically to firearms, it is the end product, achieved only after expending a large amount of valuable resources. The researcher has exchanged his time, a great deal of money, and a lot of hard work for the sake of knowledge and history.

Well, if that is how we define firearms research, then what are the elements that make it up? One can attain knowledge of arms from any of three primary sources:

By actually examining and comparing firearms, ammunition, uniforms or accoutrements. This tangible approach to firearms research is essential to understanding the arms, and is not to be substituted for by viewing photographs in a book. Features can be distinguished by actually handling these items and comparing one to another.

Absorbing the knowledge derived from others. This is accomplished by reading and retaining what is read. This form of research specifically deals with what we call secondary sources. Books, journals, pamphlets and newspaper articles are all examples of this type of transmitted knowledge.

The third, and without a doubt the most rewarding type of pure research, is the personal discovery of new, unpublished material and information.

How does the attainment of primary source material differ from merely reading secondary source material? In discovering primary material, you become the authority, and if you publish your findings, then your printed word becomes the secondary source that others will read and believe. My associates, George Moller and Doctor Richard Marohn, and I will tell you of some of our experiences in our quest for a professional approach to firearms research.

Richard C. Marohn:

Most of my experience has been in researching the Colt Double Action Revolver Model 1877, so many of the references here are related to that experience. However, I've also researched John Wesley Hardin, the Texas gun-fighter, and L.D. Nimschke, the New York firearms engraver.

Although we want to focus our research particularly on firearms, we also need to look at the personal history of the firearm in terms of its owner, its maker, its user,



Triemity: Moller, Marohn, Marcot.*

etc. Therefore, a lot of what we do in firearms research today is of a personal and genealogical nature. We can do much more than simply looking at manufacturing contracts and things of that sort.

First of all, I'm going to list some references and resources I have found particularly useful. Then I'll discuss the use of the computer in doing firearms research.

Reference sources:

U.S. Census Records. Various years will include information about date and place of birth, occupation, rent/own home or farm, employed, ability to read and write, parents' origins, children, spouses, boarders, etc. (e.g. Louis D. Nimschke had a boarder: an apprentice perhaps?)

Records of the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). The Mormons are attempting to catalog the name of every person who ever lived, in a plan to provide the opportunity for baptism; they have done extensive research into church records in Europe and South and Central America. They have branch genealogical libraries in various cities and the central collection in Salt Lake.

Other Church Records. These offer a rich source of information on marriages, baptisms, births, deaths, etc., often not contained in civil records. (e.g.), discovering Nimschke's marriage record in the microfilm archives of the German Presbyterian Church, stored in Philadelphia, confirmed my suspicions of the name of his city of birth in Europe).

Newspaper Accounts. Obvious primary sources for

*Tri-em-ity: condition of having three "M's" in one place.

material about gunfights, battles, arrests, and the like, including obituaries. Many newspapers have small gossip items of personal and local interest, including arrivals at local hotels, or gossip overhead in hotel lobbies. Often, microfilm can be obtained on Interlibrary Loan from your local library. (e.g.: found at the New York Public Library, Nimschke's obituary in the German newspaper, not in the English, or a small notice that John Wesley Hardin purchased a part-interest in the Wigwam Saloon).

Military Service Records. These records are well known to many researchers, especially those who collect Civil War weapons with a history. They also apply to Indian Wars, Spanish American Wars, etc. Pension applications give much family information. Don't forget Texas Rangers' records ("Frontier Battalion"). Will Ten Eyck, the deputy sheriff who arrested Hardin, his birth date, place of birth, etc. from Ranger Records.

Historical Societies. Good sources for the history, personal biographies and obituaries, and newspapers of a particular area. They may have reference libraries to use, and may sometimes do research or provide names of researchers. A particularly fine Society is the Kansas Historical Society. They have a complete folio of newspaper items, photos, etc.

City Directories provide valuable information about occupations, even dates of death (when a person disappears from the Directory, and the name of a widow may appear).

Factory & Sporting Goods Dealers Catalogs. Catalogs and advertisements put out by firearms manufacturers and by sporting goods dealers, give information on available models, prices, etc.

Books, and Books about Books. Books written about particular persons, or towns, or events; other books, like those by Ramon Adams, give some idea about the accuracy of the writer.

Research Libraries. New York Public Library and the Chicago Newberry Library. The Newberry has complete collections of Western history, Civil War history, American Colonial history, etc.

Fire Insurance Maps show a city, block by block, including the type of building, its street address, its usage, etc. Many can be found in the specific city, but they are also in the Library of Congress, for which they publish an Index, (e.g. Alfred Teweles made gun cases for Colt's in Hartford and then moved to New York City in 1892, where he continued making cases, later referred to as "Hartley & Graham Cases." The insurance map clearly shows how he lived and worked within a few blocks of Hartley and Graham. L.D. Nimschke first

lived and worked on Essex Street near Canal and Division in Manhattan; though changed, the buildings remain, and the insurance atlases help visualize the neighborhood; or El Paso in 1895 when John Wesley Hardin could walk a few blocks from his room to his office across the street from the Gem Saloon, where he gambled and help up the crap game, a block away from the Wigwam Saloon, where he drank and which he owned for a while, and another block to the Acme, where he was shot.)

Immigration Records, Ship Manifests, Naturalization Records. Immigration records and ship manifests are available at the National Archives or a local branch of the Archives. Naturalization records are in the city where the naturalization was accomplished. These records will give information on the name of the boat, the number of passengers, the country of origin, names of other passengers, declared occupation, age, gender, port of embarkation, etc. (e.g. Louis Daniel Nimschke came over on the ship Charles Crooker from Liverpool as Ludwig, age 18 etc., but listed as "female"; no relatives on the boat. His naturalization record 5 years after his immigration gives information about date of immigration, the boat, the European port, etc.).

Court Records. Federal court records are usually available in the Federal Court District concerned. You will need accurate information to find the court case. County court records include not only local trials, (e.g. a murder trial, but also probate records of a deceased person's estate, heirs etc. John Wesley Hardin's revolvers and pocket watch are listed in the inventory of his estate by serial numbers).

Patent Records and Applications. There are indices and descriptions of Patent Applications Granted, in a good local library. Copies are available through U.S. Patent Office.

Family Archives. Personal information, photos, friendships, dates, training, occupation, etc. though usually not much information about firearms.

Other Collectors. Something known to all of us, how we share information with each other. (e.g. I contact a Philadelphia collector about Nimschke letters to the Sharps factory, which he agrees to sell me. This leads to communication with Dr. Moore about his Sharps correspondence in reply to Nimschke. The Philadelphia collector contacts me after he learns of my interest in Colts, and sells me a Factory Ledger Book, which includes names of many Colt employees, which enables me to identify the name of a presentation recipient for one of our members.).

Markings on the Firearms Themselves. Such markings stimulate us to learn more, as well as give us previously

unknown information. (e.g. "J.P. Lower," Denver dealer; "C.K.C.S.&R. Co." American Express Company, different shipments.)

Inventory Ledgers. The Connecticut State Library contains the majority of the original Colt factory records and correspondence.

Firearms Research and the Modern Desk Top Computer

The personal computer can be a valuable tool for the researcher of antique firearms.

I have personally cataloged Colt double action Model 1877 revolvers, both by serial numbers and by uniqueness. Many of these are referred to as experimental models with various kinds of ejector systems that the factory was experimenting with. The same kind of research can be done with Winchesters, Smith & Wessons, Sharps, Marlins, or any antique firearm.

As factory records are somewhat deficient, and in other cases non-existent, a questionnaire concerning each gun examined will assist the researcher to get an exact picture of serial number ranges, barrel lengths, finishes, etc. The questionnaire on the M1877 Colt Double Action was started by John Kopec after he had completed his Single Action Army research. Initially he surveyed a few hundred revolvers and then turned the project over to me. I now have surveyed more than 2,000 of the 167,000 or so revolvers that were manufactured. Each revolver survey sheet has at least 27 categories of data.

Without a doubt, the best way to manage this data is to store it on a personal computer. This machine can sort, calculate and compare data easily, far outdistancing paper cards or file folders. The computer I use is an IBM AT with hard disk, and two floppy disk drives. The hard disk can store 40 million bits of information, and each 5-1/4 inch floppy disk can store 400 pages of text. For example, my entire survey of the 2,000 revolvers takes up 1,000,000 bytes, or one megabyte. All can be stored on three disks, or can be easily stored in the main hard disk storage area.

Once I'm assured that the data is well secured on disks, I can destroy all the paper. Sometimes it's important to keep the paper data, but, when we're dealing primarily with figures that can be stored in a very small amount of space using a computer disk. What I've used to analyze this data is a program called D-Base III Plus and one can create any kind of a file one wants to.

Here's an example of what else one can do with the computer. While you're working on your data field, you can make notes to yourself. You can also call up a calculator if you want to do some calculations and, let's say for example, I want to research a particular firearm to see if it's already in the data, I can enter the number and call up the material on the firearm so that the entire field of data is listed. For instance, the serial number, the caliber, the barrel length, etched cartouche, ejector, a blue finish, 100% condition,

etc., etc.

Word processing is the technical term for writing text on the computer, correcting it, and then printing it out. If you're unsure of a word, or desire a similar word, you can go through the computer dictionary or Thesaurus, call it up on a screen, without having to thumb through a dictionary or Thesaurus.

Another program, Lotus 1,2,3, is useful in keeping inventories on a spreadsheet, such as an inventory of your collection for insurance purposes. When my insurance policy comes up for renewal, I can modify the values. I can add new items at the bottom and the computer can print it out in a matter of a minute. It also gives me a permanent record for my own purposes.

I find the personal computer to be extremely useful. Not so much because it's going to discover new data for me in doing firearms research but it's a very useful way of managing large amounts of data. It is also very useful in moving data from one place to another or in analyzing it. For instance, one can do a quick count of how many .38 caliber engraved nickel-plated firearms there are among these 2,000. It would take someone hours to sort through the paper records by hand, yet with a personal computer it takes about a minute, and that's extremely useful.

George Moller:

Historical Societies. These institutions not only carry personal and family papers, but may contain records of local public officials (especially those who lived in the late 18th and early 19th century. When they left office, Officials frequently took their papers with them.)

University and College Libraries. These institutions frequently have personal papers of many people. (e.g. the Eli Whitney papers are at Yale). Also you might obtain good information from PhD's and Master's theses at universities. (There is an excellent Master's Thesis written on Civil War import arms in a Florida University).

State Adjutant General's Office Records. Historical records in this category may be found in the State Archives (as is the case with New York State National Guard Records) or in the National Guard Headquarters.

Corporation or Corporate Foundation Funded Libraries and Archives. (e.g. the Hegley Museum run by Dupont which has the J.J. Henry family records.)

Before you go on a research trip, do your homework. Define exactly what you are looking for, establish your criteria, and then write the institution (or person, in the case of individuals) to whom you're attending. In the case of institutions, tell them what you're researching and why you are interested in this particular subject. Let them know whether your work is intended for private use, or for later publication (whether it's going to be a monograph, a book,

etc.). To arrive on their doorstep unannounced is cold and impolite. Frequently you just don't get into places if you have not taken the trouble to write a letter first.

There is a wrong and a right approach to obtaining archival information — I call it "front door and back door." Front door is the most logical direct approach. In the case of Massachusetts, for instance, you could go to the State Archives, the State Adjutant General's Office, the State Library, and look at the Adjutant General's Annual Reports or his correspondence. Sometimes you must go to the State Auditor's Office or look into the Treasury records. Cancelled checks may give you dates that certain events took place and sometimes there's an annotation as to what they're for.

It is important to use your imagination to establish all the possible ways of locating any event which may have happened and try to figure out all the possible ways that event could have been recorded. To record the information you gain, photocopies are the easiest to obtain. They will last 10 or 20 years or more depending on how humid your climates are, but they often are not permitted in many archival locations. Some institutions will require you to first have the records microfilmed, which is a much slower process to get them in many cases. The National Archives can take months and some State Archives the same. If you get them, get them made in what is known as the Xerox flow process, because if you do that you can have them returned to paper and you don't have to worry about microfilm viewing them. The prices for recording this information varies with the institution. I've paid 10 or 15 cents a copy, up to over a dollar a copy and more. Then sometimes you have to take a minimum of a \$35 or \$50 order. It can get expensive. Another alternative is tape recording, but the advantage of good photocopies or microfilm which are returned to paper is that you can use them for illustrations in your text.

While you're at a State or National Archives, take the time to write definitive, clear reference citations. While you're at a museum or other institution, establish how they want you to cite your photocredits. Some of them are very long and lengthy.

After you leave any public museum or collection, write them a letter of thanks. There are more people going to come along later and if you turn them off, it's not going to help anybody. Also the letters of thanks are used by these museums to raise money, to show that they are serving a public information function.

International Research:

In conducting research abroad, I can't emphasize too much the importance of advance written notice. If you walk into a foreign museum or other facility without prior notice, you will be treated like any other tourist would. There are many ASAC Society members in Europe who will assist

you in gaining entry into the most closed of institutions, but you must contact them well in advance of your journey.

Special problems arise, of course, with the language. Many times foreign institutions will have bilingual archivists or librarians on their staff. Frequently, especially if you have planned ahead, the Director (or whoever is the head person there) will engage the services of a local college or university student to aid you in your quest. Or, maybe you can get somebody to do some work for you there. A graduate assistant (although it often may be somebody on staff) may tell you overtly: "No, we don't accept money for this," but the staff member gets hungry. Any monetary assistance you give him is "under the counter," of course, as it's a little different abroad than it is here.

Foreign countries often have different approaches to how they keep and maintain their archives. The Liege records, for instance, are not actually in Liege — they are in Brussels — and you find them under a rather particular heading: "Records of the Kingdom." The French Military records aren't with the rest of the French Archives in Paris; they're out in Vincennes. The Amsterdam Archives are not even organized like everybody else's. The Dutch archives are organized on a commercial or transactional basis and in Holland the transactions were all registered with Notary Publics, so they're listed under the Notary Public's name. You have to know either the Notary Public's name or one of the two parties to the transaction. As an example, during the Revolutionary War a Colonel Fossett worked for the British in Holland. But Colonel Fossett, like Americans and French, used local Dutch people as his agents. If you want to find these people you will have to know at least one of their names. If you don't, then you've got no chance of finding anything in the Amsterdam Archives.

Because you usually can't stay in an area long enough to do significant research, you may have to trust whomever you have selected to do your research. You will have to arm them with information and it pays to sit down with them, and plan out specifically what you want. Tell them specifically what you want them to accomplish for you. Give them plenty of clues to help them and discuss what they are expected to see in the kinds of records they're going to go through.

Museums in Europe are operated by the government, by cities, or by private concerns. Some of the larger arms museums are private. For instance, Liege is owned by Fabric Nationale. The Museum of Manufacturers in St. Etienne is owned by the MAB firm. There are also different classes of museums than you run into here in America. In Great Britain, for instance, they have Regimental Museum which have a great deal of information on individuals as well as what the regiment was doing at a particular time.

Directors of European museums are almost as diverse as their museums. Many are simply administrators and

have little or no arms knowledge. The one that comes to mind here is in Paris: the Director is a retired army colonel. One of his "perks" when he retired from the army was that he went to work in the museum. Some are PR people. The Liege Museum that I mentioned earlier is a PR effort of the Fabric Nationale, and the upper Director in this case is just that — a PR man. You have to work with the top man but hopefully get through him to the fellow who knows what they've got.

Because of greater separation between classes of people in Europe, you may run into the problem of museum staff members who are extremely conversant in the arms made for royalty and the histories of the royalty, the royal family and the gunmakers to royalty. Of course from my point of view I'm interested in the average infantry arm of the common man and they had very little knowledge or interest in this in their country's military arms. The arms made for royalty were art forms, whereas an infantry musket certainly isn't that. There is much less interest in Europe than there is in America in military arms. Only recently have books been published in other countries.

The study collections of some European countries are really surprising. You will go to one country and may find arms of another country with whom they had been once at war. You may even find some American-made arms in European museums. In Vienna, for instance, they have vast numbers of Model 1866 Winchester muskets they captured from the Turks. We found a great number of Spencers in Dresden, possibly captured from the French during the Franco-Prussian War. There will be some happy, unusual surprises waiting for you in some of these museums.

From country to country all the systems and the protocols may differ. Also from museum to museum depending on who's managing it within a country. The arms researcher must be flexible enough to work with whatever system you have or you are simply not going to obtain your information.

Some museums may not allow photographs to be taken. I've run across this right here in Denver. They require you to purchase their photographs and some of them are terribly expensive. Sometimes they want, in addition to payment for the photographs, certain payment for every copy of the book published, or they may demand copies of your book.

Roy Marcot:

Primary research on the National Level involves governmental archives records, Federal book repositories, and National Museum study collections.

The first of these, and my personal favorite place to visit, is the *National Archives* in Washington. The Archives is our Nation's repository of historical documents, photographs, maps, charts, movie film and audio

tapes. All materials deal with our National Government, but those of direct interest to our study of historical arms and the men who made or used them include the following:

Records of the U.S. Army Ordnance Department and the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ordnance exist from 1775 right up to modern times. They are arranged in over fifteen hundred separate file sections, and at last count, occupy more than 17,000 cubic feet of shelf space. They exist in ledgers, journals, books, letters, microfilm, and file boxes. They are accessed by specific and strict rules of use, administered by the Military Reference Department (formerly called the Navy and Old Army Branch). The department is run by Howard Wayman and Michael Music. After using "finding aids," the material you wish to have pulled from the shelves may take as long as four hours to arrive. Do not expect them sooner, and budget enough other projects at the archives to fill these hours of waiting.

The Archives also contain all official military records of individuals and units, in every military action fought in our Nation's history.

Primary research conducted at the National Archives must be extensively pre-planned well in advance, with ample phone calls and follow-up letters to announce your intended visit. Do not show up without this prior planning, as you will just be wasting your time. The Military Reference staff will assist you with finding aids and research tips, but keep one thing in mind: governmental agencies today are all short-staffed and extremely busy with many projects "as important as yours." Do not go there expecting staff members to locate information for you. It must be your commitment, in terms of many hours expended in searching through dusty bound volumes, or tedious hours flipping through boring rolls of microfilm, until you discover that gem of knowledge that you were searching for.

One day at the National Archives would be sufficient for an introduction into their vast holdings, but if you intend to conduct serious research, a week should be planned as a minimum stay.

Several years ago, some bright individual at the Archives decided that it would be better if they separated the records and moved some of them to the geographical area which they dealt with. Now moving genealogical records of Ellis Island to a New York City National Archives Annex may not sound like a bad idea, but what do you think of moving the Frankford Arsenal records out of the Ordnance Department's files, and sending them to the National Annex in Philadelphia? That is exactly what they did. Now if you want to research a letter from General Dyer to the Commander of the Frankford Arsenal, you'll find Dyer's letter in

Philadelphia, under "Letters Received"; and you'll find the reply in the Washington Main Archives under "Letters Received." Some improvement . . .

By the way, when I went to the Philadelphia Annex last March to research Hiram Berdan's involvement with the Frankford Arsenal, the staff informed me that I was the first one to ask for the records in the past two years . . .

The next area of research at the National level involves the *Smithsonian Institution*. This vast facility is our National Museum, and it houses millions of artifacts, both on display and in warehouses.

Doctor Edward Ezell, Curator of Armed Forces History, and his staff control such artifacts as firearms, cannon, accoutrements, cartridges and uniforms.

Again, we do not expect to merely show up on their doorstep and be allowed to view their inner vaults. As only a small percentage of artifacts can be on public display at any one time, you must pre-plan your trip. Letters and advance telephone calls are essential to maximizing your time there.

The third area of National Level research involves the *Library of Congress*. This is, possibly, the only facility where advance notice of your visit is not necessary. Numerous staff assistants are there to direct you to the correct sections or the correct buildings. The best finding aid, the card catalog, contains millions of entries, one for every book, journal or map housed there. The section on firearms alone contains numerous drawers of cards. Books are called for by a remote system, as the shelves are often far underground and accessed by staff members only. No browsing permitted here. It usually takes an hour or more for your books to come to you, so plan ample time here. There is no doubt that you'll find interesting and unusual things here.

Questions and Answers:

Statement from the floor:

A suggestion for people who are doing research in any archive: take all the information you can, so you don't have to come back. Even if you think "Well that's not too important," always take the information. An extra copy isn't going to cost you anything; an extra trip might cost you a bundle.

Roy Marcot:

The most difficult thing to do when you find your treasure trove of information is to put the blinders on and just retrieve that particular information. There is usually so much there, that you really have to budget your time. It takes so much money and effort to get you there in the first place, that you must use every possible minute, use every possible means in gathering as much information as possible. One thing I usually suggest when someone asks

me about archival research is this: once you find one word or two words on a page and you know that it is a document that you want, don't read the rest of the page. You have the rest of your life to read it once you have returned home, but you only have a little bit of time when you're at the archives or at the museum. So get a photocopy of it, or order a microfilm of it right away. You have plenty of time later on to read it.

Question:

How far back do you find the material from company maps. What kind and type of maps, and how far back do they go?

Dick Marohn.

I would guess around the 1840 s and 1850 s in some of the Eastern Cities. El Paso fire insurance maps start in the late 1880 s. In some of the Eastern cities you can go back much further.

Roy Marcot.

Right now I am dealing with the maps from the 1870s period, and even though those are fire insurance maps, remember that each of the cities would have had their own street maps. I've seen those going back to the 1840s and probably beyond.

George Moller.

Some of this may seem overwhelming because you may not be able to travel or have weeks to do the research. Remember, there are people at various libraries and communities who are private genealogists and researchers and who will do it for a fee. Usually the reference librarian at any particular facility will send you a list of who will be available. It may cost you \$10.00 an hour, or it may cost you \$25.00 an hour. But remember that you may get nothing out of all their searching if they are unable to find anything. They will still charge you whether they find something or not. But there are people who will do this research for you if you have the resources to pay for it.

Dick Marohn.

In many of the older towns, you will find the tax lists to be of extreme helpfulness. I found that true in New Haven when I went to look up who worked for Oliver Winchester. It was very easy to do from the tax lists.

Roy Marcot.

I think you can see from our talk this morning that we enjoy research quite a bit. So when you're embarking upon your own research, do call upon us. We'll be glad to help.