

Guns from Below the Mexican Border

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As one of the few remaining old time Texas gun collectors, I would like to share some of the memories I have of my experiences with gun collecting south of the border. Mexico is an interesting country, and my visits below the border left me with a lot of special memories and weapons.

The very first gun I bought, in fact, I found in the later part of the 1930s in Mexico. I was on a trip to Laredo when I decided to cross the border to Nuevo Laredo. There I visited several antique shops, one being a shop which sold old guns.

In that shop I saw my first single shot martial pistol and decided it would make a very interesting conversation piece to show my friends at home. After a bit of haggling, I purchased the pistol for \$8! I showed my find to several friends at home and was told that it was a U.S. martial pistol made by Aston. I also learned there were several shops in Houston that sold old guns. It did not take me long to visit some of them, and that's how it all began.

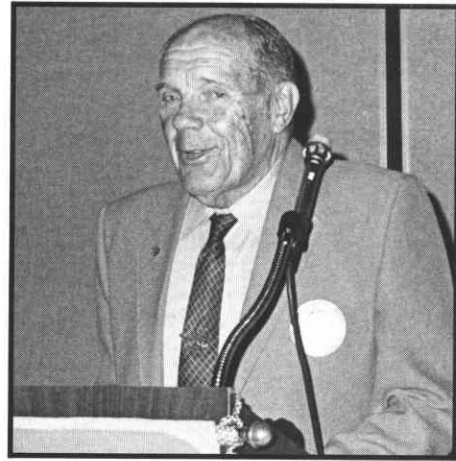
In the mid-40s, I had the pleasure of being introduced to a group of collectors who lived in the area around Waco, Texas. One in particular, Joe Bates, who lived in Wortham, became a close friend. Wortham is located on the Southern Pacific Railroad, about halfway between Houston and Dallas. The town housed a section railroad crew whose foreman was also a good friend of Joe Bates. The friend, Gilberto Ramos, was a Mexican, and through Joe Bates, he became interested in guns.

When Ramos retired from Southern Pacific, he moved back to his home in Montemoraes, Mexico. With his mastery of the English language and his knowledge of American ways, he had no problem scouring the countryside for antique guns.

One of his rare finds and a real gun story involved a Walker Colt which Ramos was able to buy only after much time and trading. He found the gun in the barnyard of a Mexican farmer, tied to the leg of a fighting cock. The weight of the gun was being used to strengthen the cock's leg muscles. After several drinks and much haggling, Ramos came away with the Walker and a very expensive fighting rooster. This Walker later became a part of Joe Bates' collection.

Not long after Ramos moved to Mexico, I tried to persuade Joe to make a trip below the border. Joe, not being fond of traveling, declined. However, he gave me Ramos's address and on my next trip, I paid him a visit.

Ramos had many interesting guns, and over the following years I was able to buy a number of good collector items



from him. To mention a few: a Nichols & Childes pre-revolver, Harmonica rifle; numerous Colt Navy and Army conversions with ivory grips; Texas Dragoon Saber; Colt single action Armies of all shapes and barrel lengths, two of them marked Wells Fargo & Co.

Gilberto Ramos had one bad habit, however. Evidently, he considered himself something of a gunsmith. When he got a group of guns, he would take them all apart, clean them, then forget how to put them back together again. I spent many hours in his home trying to match parts and numbers to make a complete gun. He might get one together on his own, but it was usually parts from several different guns.

There were shops other than the one Ramos operated in Mexico. Tom Weston had a place in Mexico City, and two very good pieces in my collection came from his store. One is an 1860 Army, engraved, with ivory grips; the other an 1851 Navy, also engraved, with ivory grips. In Monterrey, a visit to a shop right on the square produced an 1860 Army, gold and silver, engraved with Mexican eagle ivory grips, plus several other nice pieces.

It is my belief that the largest and most likely the most valuable collection of guns that ever came out of Mexico was the Tom Weston collection from Mexico City. It was purchased in 1945 by Gimble Brothers, New York. A catalogue was printed and these guns were offered to the public. A few of the rarer pieces from this collection included six Paterson pistols, two Walkers, three Paterson rifles, three revolving Colt rifles, a dozen Dragoons, Armies, Navies, and other rare guns by the hundreds.

The first time I visited a shop just outside of Monterrey, I found many guns hanging on a back wall. There were

many Colts of all types. One, a single action with ivory grips and a 7½ inch barrel, hanging near the ceiling, caught my eye. With my meager Texas Spanish, I asked, "Quanto cuesta?"

The owner shouted, "One hundred!"

I replied, "100 pesos?"

He said, "No, 100 'melican."

At that time single actions were going for \$20 or slightly more in Mexico, so I remarked that it must be a rim fire to bring that much money. He responded, "Si, rim fire."

So I told him to get it down and let me take a look. He complied and handed me the gun. The light was very bad in the shop, so I proceeded to take it to the door and examine it. You can imagine how I felt when I found it to actually be a rim fire, not tampered with, engraved, and with the original ivory grips. I wasted no time presenting him 100 "'melican" dollars.

Another unusual 1851 Navy type also came out of Mexico City. This one was claimed to have belonged to a guard at the Chapultepec Palace. Definitely not Colt or Brevete, this pistol shows much holster wear and use. It also has markings and numbers engraved which could be company numbers.

We are all familiar with the Walker Colt. One that was shipped to Veracruz, Mexico, is pictured here. This Walker was one of the first shipped by Colt to the Armed Services, as of August 14, 1847. This pistol, marked C Company #42, was issued to Sam Walker's own company.

Mexico was actually the dumping ground for the American out-dated firearms. For example, when the single shot pistols were replaced by revolving pistols, the surplus found their way to below the border. When the automatic replaced the single action, the single actions followed the same course. Most likely, the Winchester Model 66 represented the largest group of this type ever sold to Mexico. These went to the Mexican Army.

I was in Monterrey on a visit in the later part of the 1950s and read an article in the local paper stating that the largest shipment of arms to ever cross the border in the history of Mexico were Winchester Model 66s which had belonged to the Mexican Army. They were sold to George Madis.

I could name numerous other collectors who were also fortunate in purchasing weapons in Mexico. They either placed them in personal collections or sold or traded them to others.

One thing that never ceased to amaze me about Mexico was its primitive culture and society. On my first trip into the interior of Mexico in the early '40s, I was shocked to see how primitive a country could be. It was almost unbelievable. Only a day's drive from Houston, I was shocked to see the living conditions: poverty, nude children, malnutrition, large families living in a one room thatched hut.

On one memorable excursion, which took us far off the beaten path, we got to experience some of the culture firsthand. We had stopped in a Cantina for a drink. When we asked about antique pistols, one man responded in broken English that he knew a man who had a pistol. Our new acquaintance offered to take us to the man's place, but he said it was quite a long way. Well, it turned out to be about 20 miles down a lonely trail through a mesquite thicket. When we finally arrived in a clearing, there were a number of huts built out of sticks and mud. Numerous animal hides hung on a line, and not a person was in sight. Our guide told us to sit still. After a short time a man appeared from one of the huts. We greeted him and informed him of our mission.

After much talk he went into one of the huts and returned with a rolled up wolf hide. After several drinks he proceeded to unwrap the hide and produce a beat-up unoperative Spanish copy of a Smith & Wesson. We had several more drinks, then thanked him and left. We left behind the remains of the bottle of stump blower. As we departed we realized that we still hadn't seen another living human being. It was a very interesting day, but as you can see not all trips were rewarding. At least they were always enjoyable.

On still another excursion in Mexico, I was traveling with a curbstone peddler. (In case you're not familiar with the term, a curbstone peddler is a salesman who has a list of all types of other people's merchandise which they would like to dispose of.) The peddler had stopped by a store and said, "let me drop in to see if Henry could use anything I have." After a short time he came out and handed me a Colt Lightning with a 7 inch barrel, nickel plated, pearl grips, engraved, and in almost new condition. But like all Lightnings, it would not work. He asked me for \$25 so that he could pay the man for the gun. I obliged, thinking it was a good deal.

After returning to Houston, I took the Lightning and several other items that I had acquired on this trip over the show one of my friends, who was also an American Society member. He, not being a Colt collector, did not think much of my find and told me that I had paid good money for a piece of junk. I believed him, and being very discouraged, I immediately decided to dispose of the gun. I traded it in on a single action with a cut-off barrel, which I found in a local gun shop.

The new owner placed the Lightning in a show case and put a \$50 price tag on it. I would go by the shop every month or so and the Lightning was still there. After looking at it for several years, I decided that I could not live without the gun, so I returned to the shop to buy it, only to find it had been sold the week before. As the old saying goes, you can't win them all.

All my visits below the border were not just for guns,

though the trip sometimes wound up that way. I recall one afternoon when my curbstone peddler (Jess) came into my office and asked me to run down to Monterrey with him. He had a load of merchandise he wished to sell there.

I told him it was too late in the day to start now, but that I would be ready to leave first thing in the morning. The next evening we were in Monterrey with his load of several thousand hypodermic needles and syringes. And the following morning we called on a doctor friend of his in a medical clinic where Jess was to deliver his cargo.

The doctor was a very nice, sociable, and friendly man, and after much conversation about hypo syringes, hunting, and fishing, he invited us on a hunting trip to his home and ranch below Vera Cruz the following day.

When we arrived at the ranch, a barbecue feast was waiting for us. And in the center of the table was a roasted cow head: certainly a first for me.

The hunt took place that night. We shot a number of deer and a large turkey. The following day we spent watching the ranch hands prepare the meat and make jerky. The jerky was hung on lines to dry and the heads were boiled. During this time the conversation got around to guns, and believe me it was a real surprise when the doctor produced a cased baby Patterson and a cased Tipping & Lawden Sharps, both in fine condition. No, I did not get the Patterson, for it had belonged to one of his relatives in Spain. However, since he did not know the history of the Sharps, he let me have it. On the barrel was an inscription, "presented to Gastero Ernesto Livre 2nd Agosto 1873.

Jess and I left Monterrey filled with happy memories of several very good friends and a wonderful hunt. Jess felt good about donating the syringes to the clinic, and I felt great about my fine cased Sharps. Even though this particular trip had started for a different reason, it wound up a successful gun excursion.

There were many fine guns liberated from Mexico. A few weren't that great, but one thing is certain: those trips below the border in search of unknown treasures brought

me many interesting experiences and a lot of wonderful memories. I hope you have enjoyed them half as much as I enjoyed sharing them with you.

★★★★★★

Texans, of course, have an advantage in discovering guns in Mexico, but others can have adventures there, too, as this tale will prove.

In 1950 I went to Mexico from the Chicago area with my brother-in-law, Dr. Meno Spann, a professor of German at Northwestern University, who spent many summers there writing text books, fishing, and having a good time. There is no room for the whole story, but we spent some time in Mexico City, where I naturally went to Tom Weston's shop, mentioned by Paul Janke. He had many guns, but I was also a cartridge collector, and he had some unusual paper cartridges. I didn't know what they were, but bought several for a peso each — about 8¢US in those days. When I got home, I was able to identify them as early .52 Sharps cartridges, wrote Meno (who stayed longer than I did) to get the rest when he came through. He did — but he had to pay 2 pesos each!

We were in Taxco for several days, stayed at the Casa Humbolt, the one-time home of the German naturalist which was a semi-museum. I saw a relic of a Remington rolling block carbine in a shop window, went in, asked the owner if he had any other old guns. He sent his young son home for a Colt No. 3 derringer which he said he carried when he didn't want to take his Colt automatic. He gave it to me, I opened it, and a .38 S&W centerfire cartridge fell out! I said "This won't shoot in here" and he said "Oh, yes, it shoots fine." So it would: the gun had been converted to centerfire, and can be seen on page 111 of John Parsons' book, *Henry Deringer's Pocket Pistol*. I had to pay 100 pesos for it.

I got a Remington dog's head cane gun and some other goodies, too, on that trip, but I've taken enough of Paul's space even if he did say it was OK. CRS

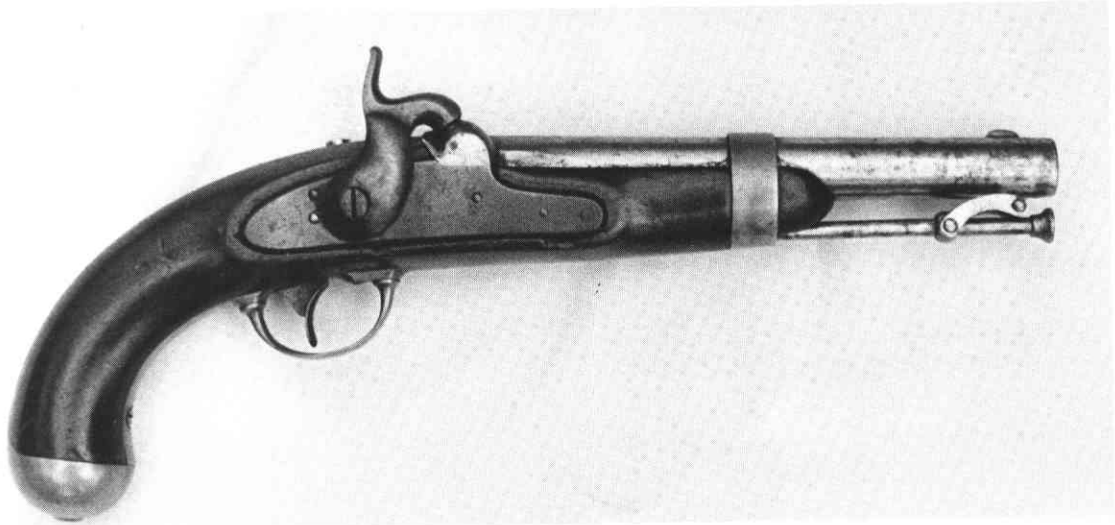


Snow White Corsican Ram

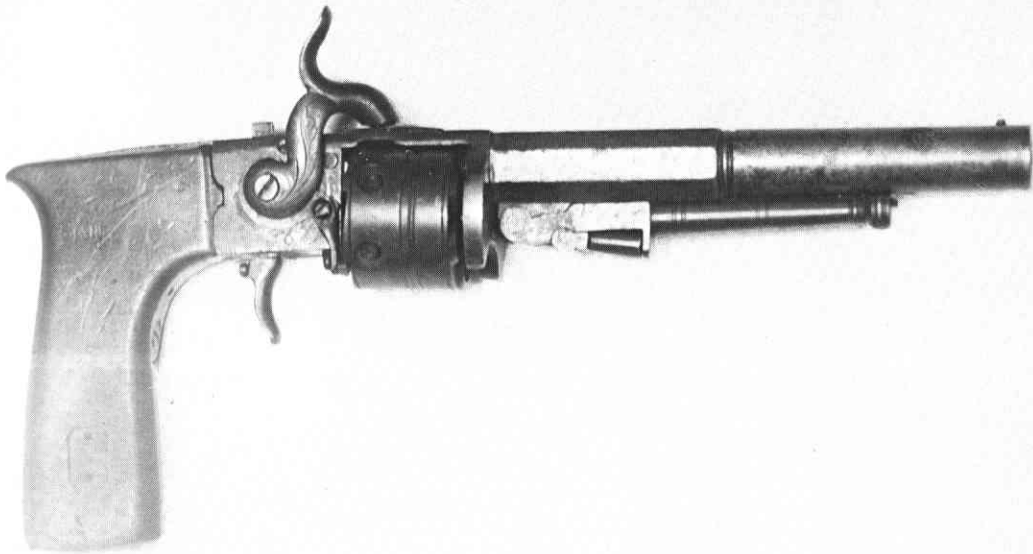


Fallow Deer

Some of Paul's "Guns from Below the Border."



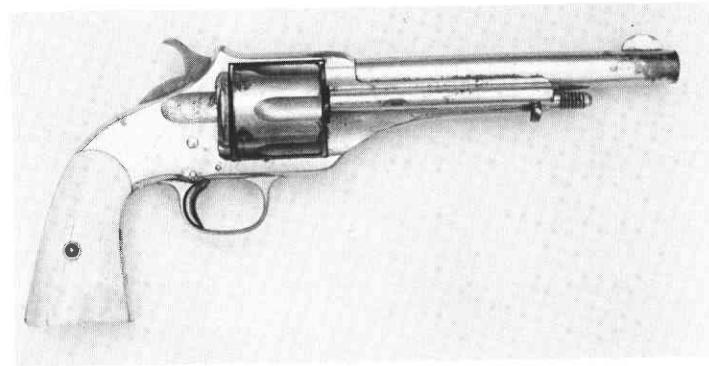
U.S. Model 1842 dated 1847, by H. Aston. "The first Pistol I purchased down there."



(Rufus) Nichols & (Edward) Childs, Conway, Mass. U.S. Patent no. 707, April 24, 1838. Ultra rare: less than 25 pistols were made.

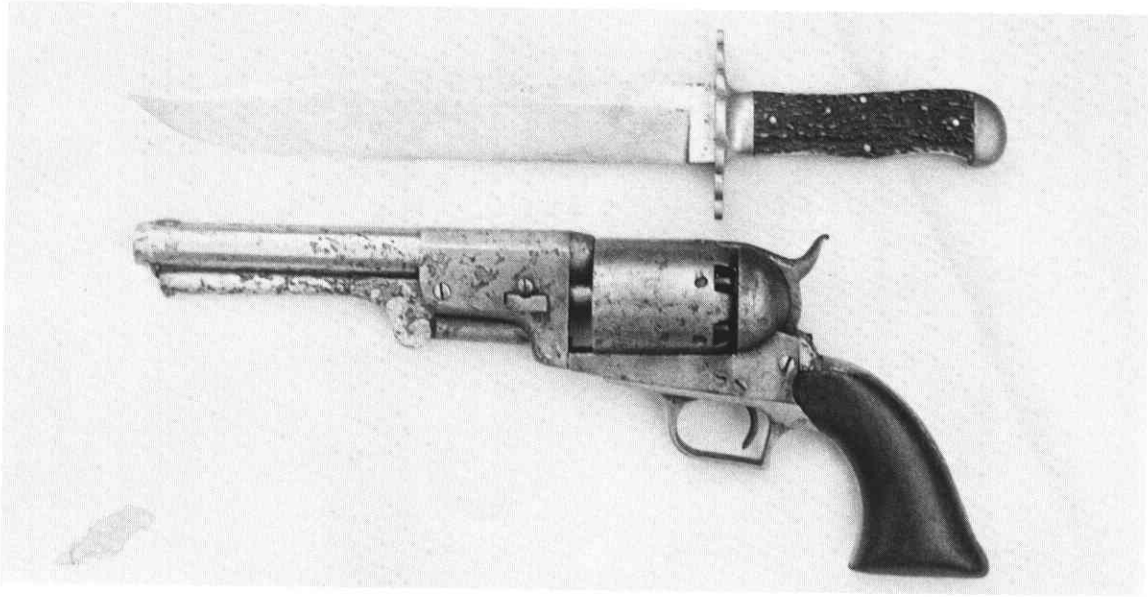


Tipping & Lawden, no. 765, engraved, .30 calibre rimfire. Marked: "Presented to Gastero Ernesto Livre, Vera Cruz, 2 Augusto, 1873."

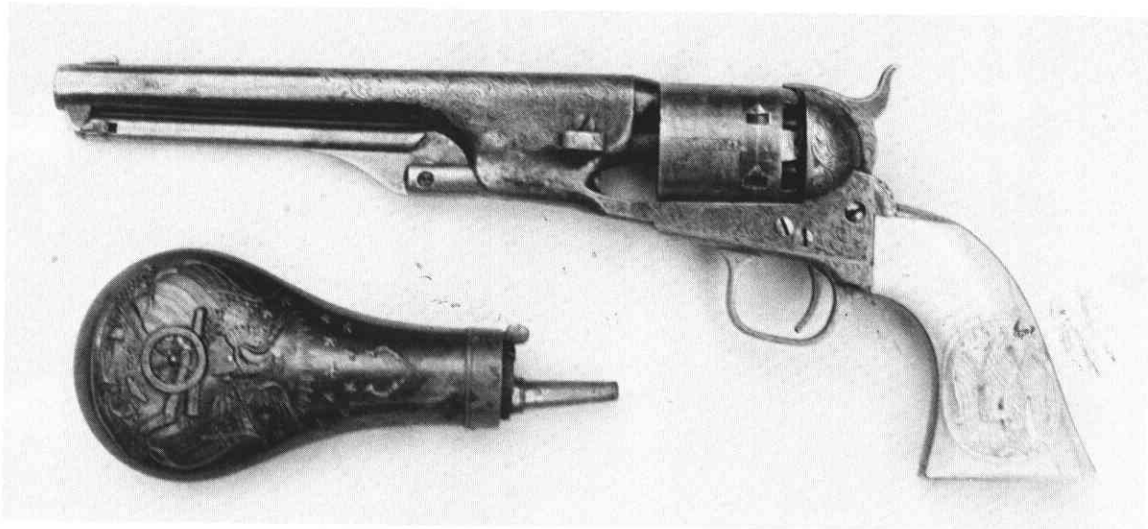


Forehand & Wadsworth cal. .44 centerfire. Only a few hundred made. From Gilberto Ramos, Montemoraes.

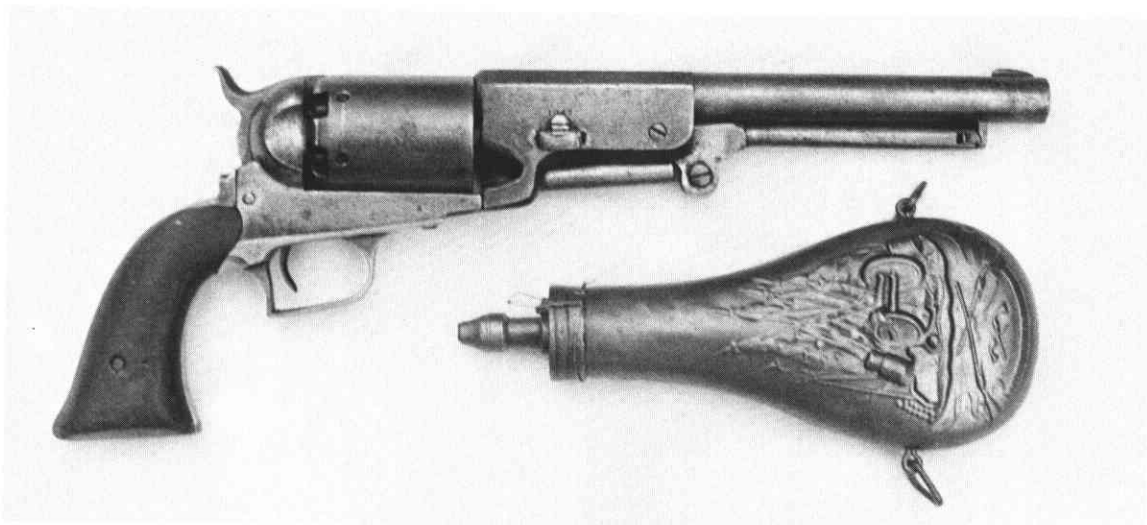
They had Colts!



A Second Thousand Walker with a Mexican knife.



An engraved 1861 Navy in fine condition, from Tom Weston's shop in Mexico City.



Colt Walker, C Company no. 42. 214 Walker pistols marked "C Company" were issued to 1st regiment, Texas Volunteers, Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1847.

More Colts!



Well, almost! This is an engraved Metropolitan Arms Co. with ivory grips from Gilbert Ramos in Montemorales.



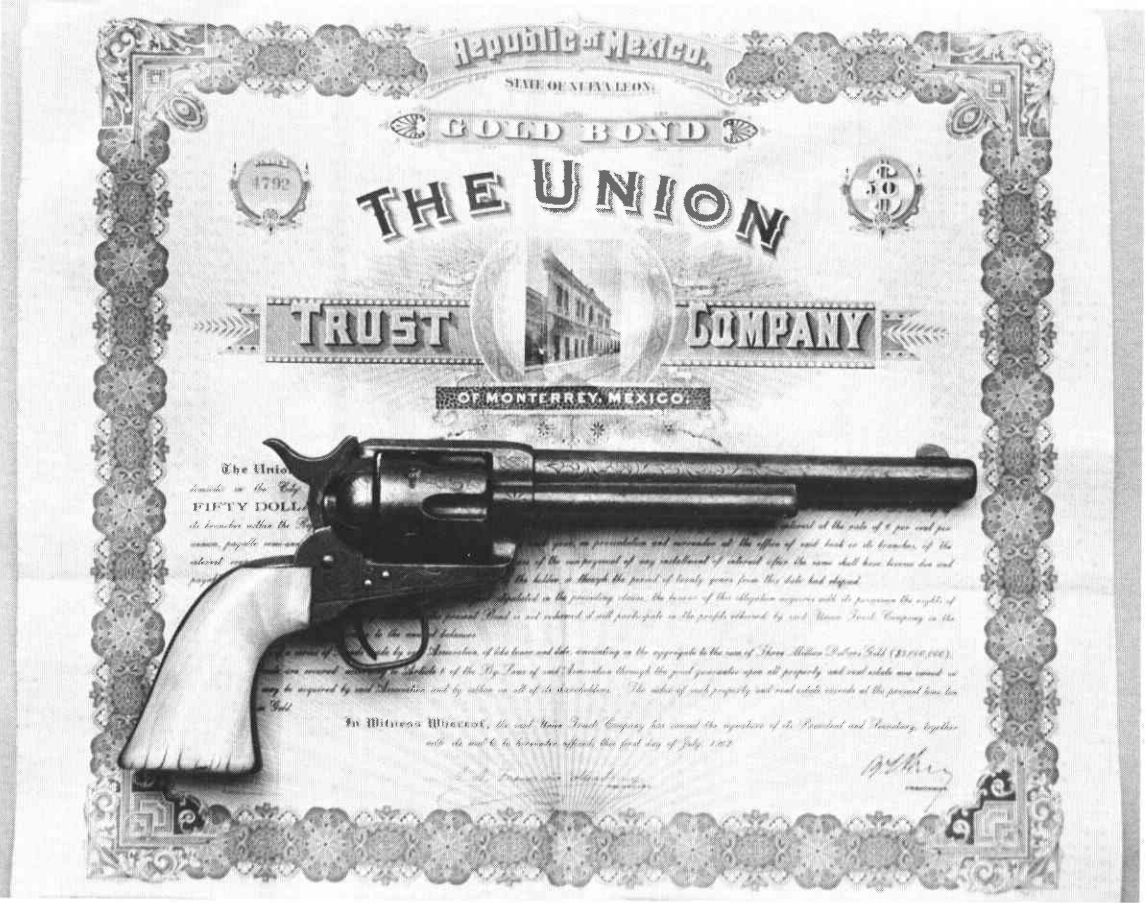
This Colt 1851 Navy conversion came from Montemorales, too.



This Colt 1861 Navy conversion, no. 2232, .38 rimfire, is nickel plated, has ivory grips.

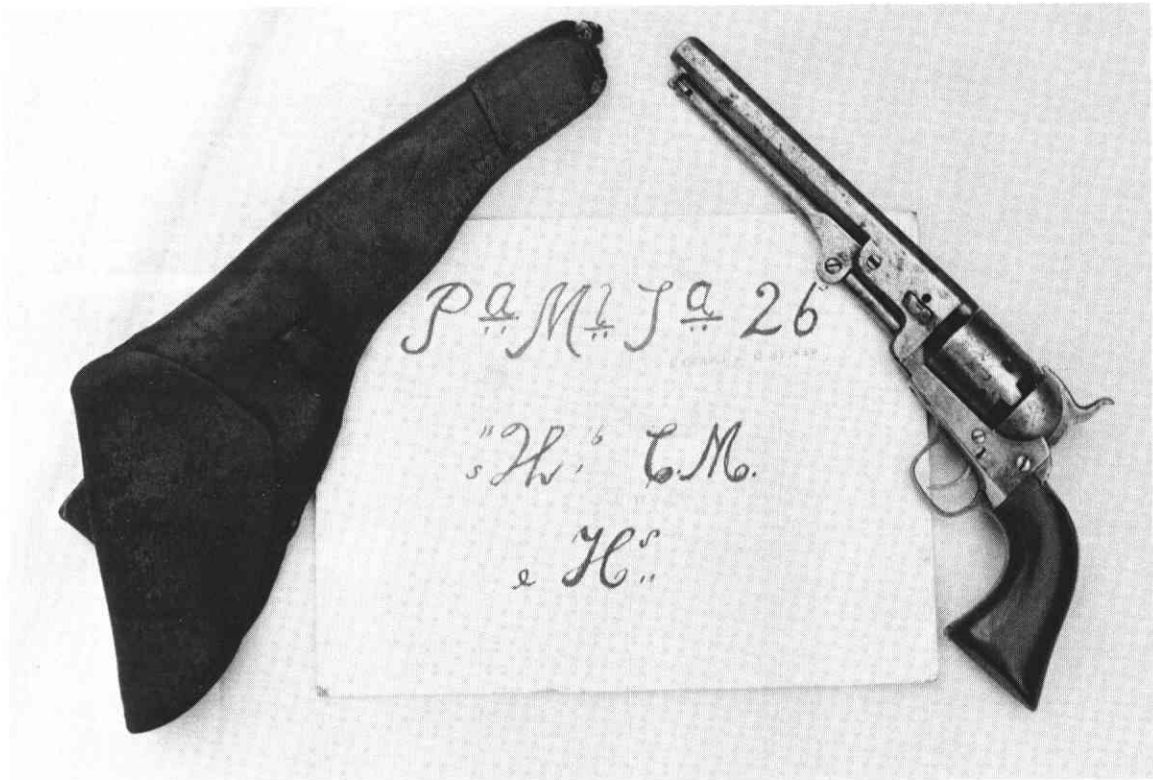


An 1860 Colt Army in fine condition from an antique shop in Monterey. Below, an 1863 Colt Navy, also fine condition, from Tom Weston.

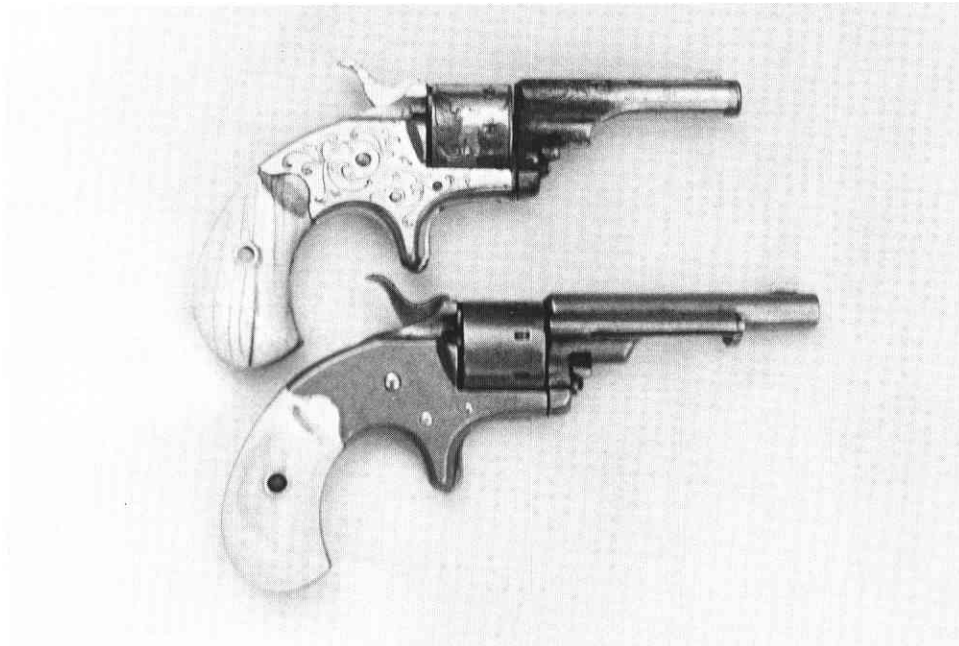


Colt Single Action no. 960, .44 rim fire, engraved, ivory grips. From Monterey.

A Few More



A copy of a Colt 1851 Navy from Tom Weston. A Chapultepec Palace Guard issue: the markings on barrel, backstrap, and cylinder are shown.



Two Colt open top .22 revolvers from Montemoraes.

But that's not all!



Paul has a few other guns, too!



A friendly warning.