

Figure 1. Captain Lemon

# Oh, If It Could Only Talk

Charles L. Foster

It was Friday and the Southeastern Arms Collectors Association was presenting another fine show in the Atlanta area. As is my habit or addiction, depending on my explanation verses that of my wife, I scurried about looking for an addition to my collection.

The show was only a few minutes old when I came across a table belonging to a gentleman selling some long arms, which he had used for props for his paintings. He was interested in producing art with a Civil War theme.

I purchased two muskets and a rifle. The muskets were European imports and the rifle was an English volunteer pattern of 1856. The rifle was in relic condition without rear sight or ramrod and bored smooth for use as a shotgun. Its attraction was a faint JS and anchor stamp in the wood along with the number "84". These marks were suspected evidence of Confederate importation. An unmarked lockplate and a checkered wrist indicated that the rifle was originally meant for sale to the English volunteer market. I knew that a good number of this type of rifle were available on the used arms market in England when our Civil War erupted. This rifle was proof of the importation of such arms; however, the rifle is not our subject today.

A short time after returning home, I received a call from an excited fellow collector and great friend, Mr. Joe Howard of Marietta Georgia. Joe had been at the same show and spoke with the artist from whom I had purchased the rifle. During their conversation the artist, Mark Lemon, of Ackworth Georgia remarked that he wondered where his great great grandfathers pistol might be. Mr. Lemon had the diary of his ancestor, which included an entry about a presentation of a pistol.

I need to provide some background. For me, the story begins with Samuel E. Smith of Markesan, Wisconsin. Veterans of the American Society of Arms Collectors knew Sam Smith as one of the original 27 founders of this organization and as its second president. Many current and past members of the Society were sponsored by Sam. I believe that few members of the Society did not at one time turn to Sam for help with their collecting and research.

It is said that the wisest thing we can do in life is to pick good parents, and so it was through the indulgences of



a really great Dad, that I found myself at the age of 14 in Sam Smith's legendary gunroom. Among Sam's collection were several LeMat revolvers; one stood out above the rest.

LeMat revolvers at the time were themselves quite a mystery. Were they truly Confederate? Where were they made? Why were there so many variations? The LeMat in question obviously had a special story to tell.

Sam kept a complete and detailed card catalog for each item in the collection. Let me read part of the card to you:

First Model LeMat, about 1860-61, Co A 18<sup>th</sup> Ga. Marked on top of barrel in one line reading toward the muzzle Col. LeMat's patent and serial number 163 on all parts except the cylinder which is numbered 192. This is the original cylinder, however, as evidenced by the equal wear & condition with the remainder of the revolver plus scroll engraving. Nine shot round cylinder of .41 caliber, plus the .65 caliber smoothbore shot barrel, with adjustable nose on hammer to fire either one. The loading lever is on the right side. Swivel ring in the butt and spur trigger guard—all showing this to be the First Model LeMat, as does the low serial. Probably made in New Orleans before the War in 1860 or 1861, according to the book *Confederate Handguns*. 7 parts round & part octagon barrel. No original finish, but all complete and original, and in very good condition. Two silver name plates on each side of each of the two grips, one engraved Co A 18<sup>th</sup> proving Confederate use. Purchase of Stephen Van Rensselaer, Williamsburg, Virginia on Nov. 1, 1934. He had obtained it earlier that fall

from a Virginia family nearby who had the gun since one of their ancestors picked up the piece at a nearby battle to their farm in the closing days of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

The plates are shaped as stars and crescents. One star and one crescent to each grip The plates on the left grip are blank. Had there been a name? Why was one side blank? Sam began a quest for more information.

A letter from Colonel Allen P. Julian, Atlanta Historical Society to Sam Smith, dated April 15, 1961, identified four different company commanders for Co. A of the 18th Georgia Infantry Regiment. The presumption was that the LeMat had belonged to an officer. However, students of the war know that many enlisted men brought their own arms so the presumption of ownership by an officer could be wrong. Another complicating factor was the fact that more than one unit carried the designation 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia. For a while Sam went on to other projects.

In 1973, Sam was again corresponding about the LeMat. This time it was with Mr. Cecil W. Anderson of Conley Georgia. Mr. Anderson was convinced that the subject LeMat was the former property of James J. O'Neil. I cannot tell you how Mr. Anderson came to that conclusion. Once again the search was put on hold.

After much effort and numerous letters, one fact remained. There was no individual name engraved on the plate. Absolute certainty of the original owner remained impossible. Here then was another example of the collector lament, "Oh if it could only talk."

Allow me to return to the Atlanta show where I began my narrative. Mark Lemon, from whom I had purchased the aforementioned arms, had at a previous time contacted a former member of the ASAC to ask about LeMat number 163. Wiley Sword in his 1986 publication *Fire Power From Abroad*, mentioned the 18<sup>th</sup> Ga. LeMat on page 97 of that book.<sup>2</sup> Although Wiley had been at my home on a social visit he did not recall that I had the pistol. I telephoned Mr. Lemon and introduced myself as the current owner of the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia LeMat. Consequently, I learned of the diary kept by James Lile Lemon and of his mention of being presented the LeMat upon his promotion to Captain. I had the subsequent pleasure of visiting Mark at his home in Acworth, the same home that Captain Lemon left when he joined Company A, the "Acworth Infantry."

*It struck me as I visited with Mark that the diary of Captain Lemon was in effect speaking for the LeMat revolver. No, I thought it's not the diary, it's Mark Lemon who is giving voice to the pistol and to his ancestor. I wanted to share that with you. Allow me to introduce Mr. Mark Lemon and ask him to give you some background about Captain*

Lemon and the history that surrounds us as we meet here in Atlanta.

Mark Lemon of Ackworth Georgia the great-great grandson of Captain Lemon was introduced to the members of the society and made some extemporaneous remarks. I will summarize, but not quote verbatim those remarks.

Mark and his parents have purchased and continue to restore the original home of Captain Lemon. That home is featured in a wartime drawing by Theodore R. Davis on June 6, 1864 for Harpers Weekly. The drawing is titled, "Arrival of Gen. Sherman at his headquarters." The home, one of only seven Ackworth homes not burned by Sherman served as his staff headquarters.

Captain Lemon's diary and daybook lay undiscovered in this home until found by Mark Lemon. Still blood stained as a result of a neck wound suffered by the Captain during the assault on Fort Sanders (Knoxville Campaign Nov. 1863), the diary tells of the presentation and later use of his LeMat revolver.

One diary entry reads:

Mar 5th Today I have been promoted to capt of co. as J.B. has resigned due to ill health & effects from his wounding at Manassas. The boys gave me a fine little ceremony & presented me with a beautiful French LeMat revolver & nicely engraved . . .<sup>3</sup>

Another entry tells of his wounding during the assault on Fort Sanders (November 29, 1863) . . .

. . . I had left my sword in the mud & had drawn my pistol and moved up firing as fast as I could when I suddenly felt at tremendous blow to my head & lost consciousness & next felt my faculties later that day & it was then I knew we were repulsed & I a prisoner . . .<sup>4</sup>

James Lile Lemon remained a captive for the rest of the war. He was one of the "Immortal 600," placed on Morris Island, South Carolina where they were used as shields against Confederate counter battery fire. He survived the war, despite the fact that the death rate for these 600 officers was 20 percent as compared with the 13 percent death rate at Andersonville, and died June 12, 1907.

Mark Lemon in his remarks to the Society noted that while his ancestor had the LeMat for the shortest time of any of its owners, he made the best use of it in his defense of the Confederacy.

Captain Lemon and Co A of the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia Infantry had been part of Hood's brigade, which also included the Hampton legion, First Texas, Forth Texas, and Fifth Texas Infantry regiments. Reorganized in January of 1863 the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia was brigaded with the 16<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Georgia, and Phillip's and Cobb's Legion.<sup>5</sup>

As collectors we should take quick note of the fact that Captain Lemon was presented his LeMat by men who pur-

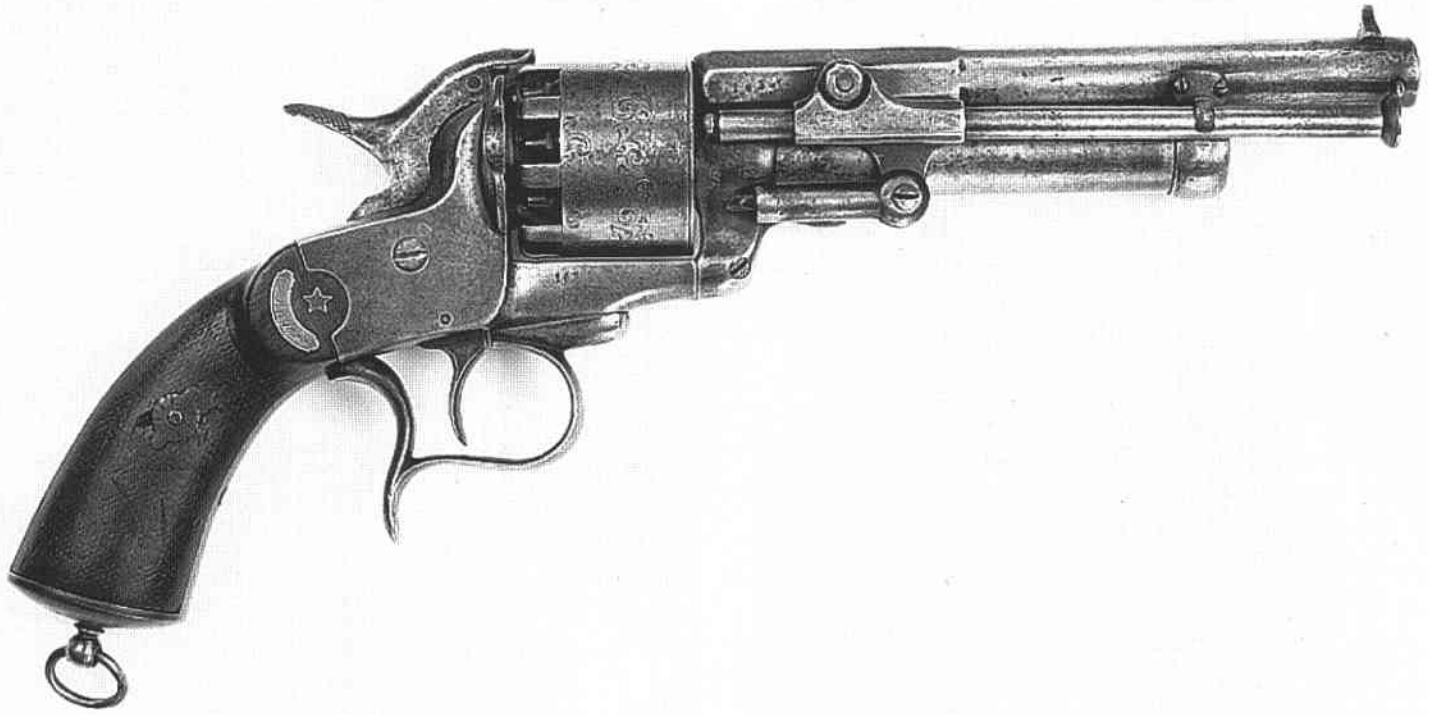


Figure 2. Captain Lemon's LeMat. Serial number 163. The semi-circular inlay behind the silver star is marked *Co. A 18 Ga.* The 18th Georgia regiment was one of the state's most famous.

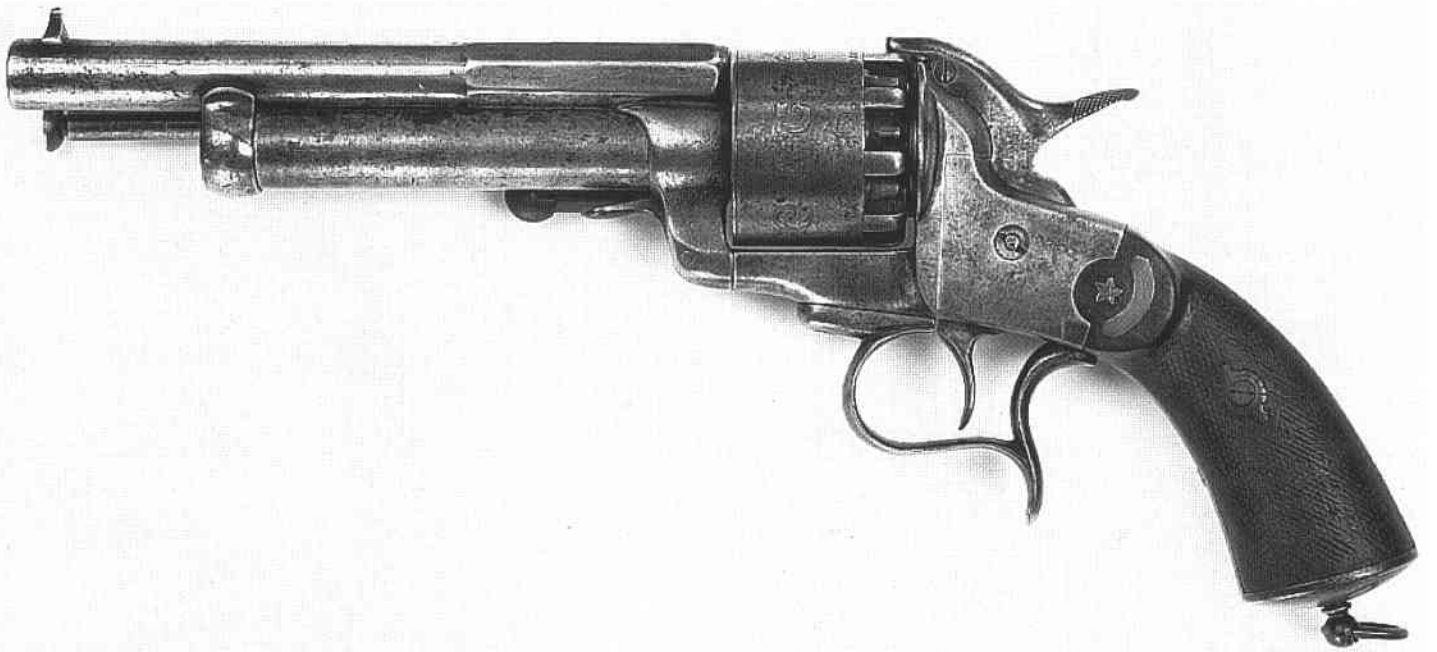


Figure 3. Captain Lemon's LeMat.—left side.

chased it in Richmond. Kent, Paine and Company of that city advertised in the December 4, 1862 edition of the WHIG offering LeMat pistols for sale.<sup>6</sup> I think it is fair to assume that serial number 163, Captain Lemon's LeMat may have come from that firm. An interesting question would be, "are all the low serial numbered first model LeMats with known associations really guns rejected by Confederate ordinance inspectors, subsequently finding their way to the private market? William Albaugh's listing of LeMat serial numbers in his book *Confederate Handguns* notes several low numbered guns such as "21—Carried by Private William F. Ruger, Company E "Eutaw" Regiment, S.C. or 115 carried by J. E. B. Stuart, or 189 carried by Major Henry Wirz, Commander of Andersonville Prison Georgia. Captain Lemon's LeMat we now know as a private purchase. If there are other documented private purchase LeMats I am not aware of them. There are numerous examples of LeMats with known associations. Many of those examples do point to private purchase. The 1996 publication of the book *LeMat, The Man, The Gun* by Valmore J. Forgett, Alain F. Serpette, and Marie Antoinette Serpette was a breakthrough supplying many new facts. Through their work I can tell you that the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia LeMat was a product of Liege Belgium.<sup>7</sup> The pistol is a first model marked on its octagon to round barrel "Col. LeMat's Patent." serial number 163 appears on the frame, flash guard, barrel, loading lever, and in pencil on the bottom inside of the left grip.

The shotgun barrel carries the serial number 163 near the frame as well as the letter "M" near its muzzle. The letters LM intertwined and within an oval border are stamped in the barrel next to the serial number. The inside of both grips are stamped BAGUET and the back strap has what appears to be the letter "B" stamped on the left side under the grip. The cylinder is serial numbered 192 and is modestly engraved. A rope like engraved border runs around the cylinder near its face.

Some mystery still remains regarding Captain Lemon's LeMat. Why is one plate blank? If his name was on the plate,

why remove his name, but not the unit identification? Did a Virginia family really find the pistol? Did another member of Company A of the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia recover the pistol after Captain Lemon was wounded and then carry it afterwards? I don't know.

OH! IF IT COULD ONLY TALK!!

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Smith, Samuel E. private card catalog.
2. Sword, Wiley.
3. Lemon, James L. diary of.
4. Lemon, James L. diary of.
5. Smith, Gerald J.
6. Albaugh, William A. & Benet, Hugh Jr. & Simmons Edward N.
7. Forgett, Valmore J. & Serpette Alain & Marie Antoinette.