

Collecting Firearms Curiosa

Matthew Schneiderman

If this society were a university, and if its membership list were the faculty directory, you would find that the Department of Firearms Curiosa has four members: Professor and Chairman David Fink, Professor Robert Palmer, Professor Mel Flanagan (who is also Distinguished Professor of Blunderbuss), and the newest addition, Assistant Professor Matthew Schneiderman.

Today, as at many other universities, the junior faculty will be giving the lecture.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THIS DISCIPLINE

My parents gave me my first antique arms book in the late 1950s, when I was about 10 years old (this hobby, whether genetic or acquired, came upon me early). *Gun Collecting*, by Charles Edward Chapel, was first published in 1939, and my copy was the revised edition of 1947. In the 1960s, when I actually owned a few pistols, I added the bible of that era, Chapel's *The Gun Collector's Handbook of Values*. In both books Chapel referred to these firearms as "Freaks and Oddities," and in the *Handbooks* did not even price them. Also from the late 1940s, an early catalogue by the New York (and later Los Angeles) dealer Martin Retting includes a selection of "Freak Pistols." These strange firearms couldn't be ignored, but they were not quite worthy of respect.

In 1955, Lewis Winant (Figure 1), a member of this Society and the founding Chairman of this Department, published his classic *Firearms Curiosa*. In addition to supplying a loftier name, he gave birth to a whole new collecting area, and organized these arms into sensible groups. In over 50 years, there's been no subsequent book in English. It took time to catch on, but eventually collectors, dealers, and auctioneers accepted this term, and still use it today.



Figure 1. Lewis Winant, from the *Bulletin of the American Society of Arms Collectors*, #8, Fall 1963, the year of his death.



WHAT ARE "FIREARMS CURIOSA?"

We often use "Curiosa" as a noun: "Dave and Robert own a lot of Curiosa." But it's actually an adjective, from the Latin word *curiosus*, meaning "inquiring" or "inquisitive." A questioning person is curious; a curious object inspires questions and inquiry. So Firearms Curiosa are not just weird, odd, or strange guns. At heart they inspire wonder and questioning. They make us stop, go back, and ask, "WHAT is THAT?" or "How in the world does that work?"

There's one 1983 French book devoted exclusively to these weapons: *Armes Insolites et Systemes* by Jean Rene Clergeau. The dull translation is "Unusual Arms and Systems," but in a Sunday New York Times book review from September 15, 2005, I found a better meaning: "The delightful French word "insolite" refers to something so completely unexpected that it causes the beholder to stand back and marvel." These are the weapons I'll be talking about and showing today.

FIRST, A SAD OBSERVATION:

Firearms Curiosa still don't get much respect.

1. A French book [Singer] has a Curiosa chapter titled "Odd or Peculiar Systems."
2. Greg Martin Auctions' online catalogues list them under "Curiosities/other."
3. From a Little John auction catalogue description: ". . . FALLS [my emphasis] into the Oddity class."

One talk can't change the world, but I want to give you a sense of why I enjoy Firearms Curiosa, and of the somewhat idiosyncratic way I think about them.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS COLLECTING AREA

Lewis Winant not only named this branch of arms collecting, but also organized it, and his chapter headings are still useful in thinking about and constructing a collection (Figure 2). There's clearly some overlap and some newer ideas, as you'll see, but his table of contents holds up pretty well even in current collecting practice.

One other note: there are Flintlock Curiosa (Figure 3), but post-Forsyth percussion systems (both copper cap and metallic cartridge) are especially malleable, and lend themselves to flights of gunmaking imagination. The 19th was the Firearms Curiosa century.

1. KNUCKLEDUSTER

A pistol that includes steel, brass, or plastic knuckles (one or more) so it can be used for reinforced punching and hitting as well as for shooting.

CONTENTS	
Foreword	.....
1. Combination Weapons	.....
2. Miniature Firearms	.....
3. Two-Barrel Revolvers	.....
4. Two-Cylinder Revolvers	.....
5. Squeezers and Knuckledusters	.....
6. Alarm and Trap Guns	.....
7. Knife Pistols and Cane Guns	.....
8. Other Disguised Guns	.....
9. Superposed Loads	.....
10. Turret and Chain Guns	.....
11. Miscellaneous	.....
12. Fancy Free	.....

Figure 2. The table of contents from Lewis Winant's *Firearms Curiosa* (hereafter, "Winant").

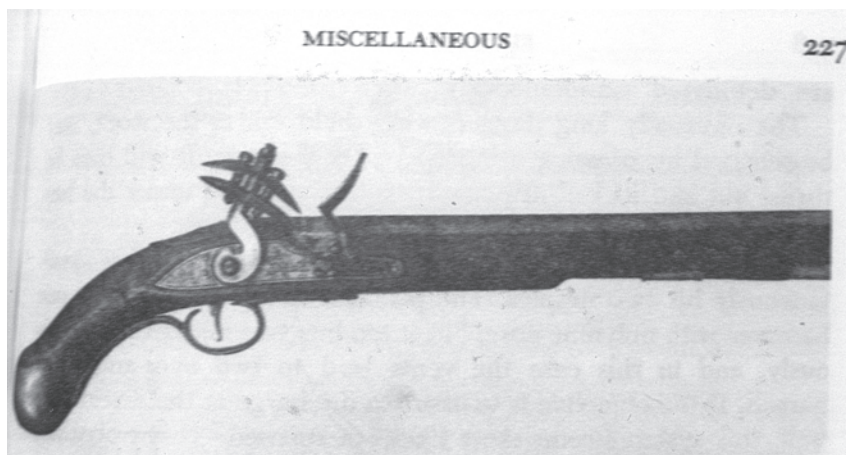


Figure 3. The Douglas Lock, designed by Sir Howard Douglas, England, 1817 (Winant, page 227).

Firearms Curiosa that become overexposed, because most of them are NOT BEAUTIFUL and cannot keep our attention aesthetically. So the collector and the viewer must take creative action to reemphasize their special nature. For example, this might involve subtly and subversively changing the position of all Reids on a show table to assume the Knuckleduster Position, either right or left handed (Figure 5). I recommend this maneuver to all of you.

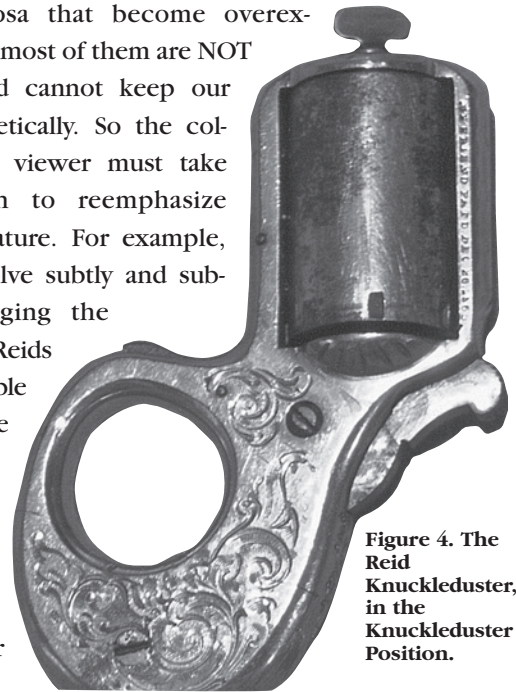
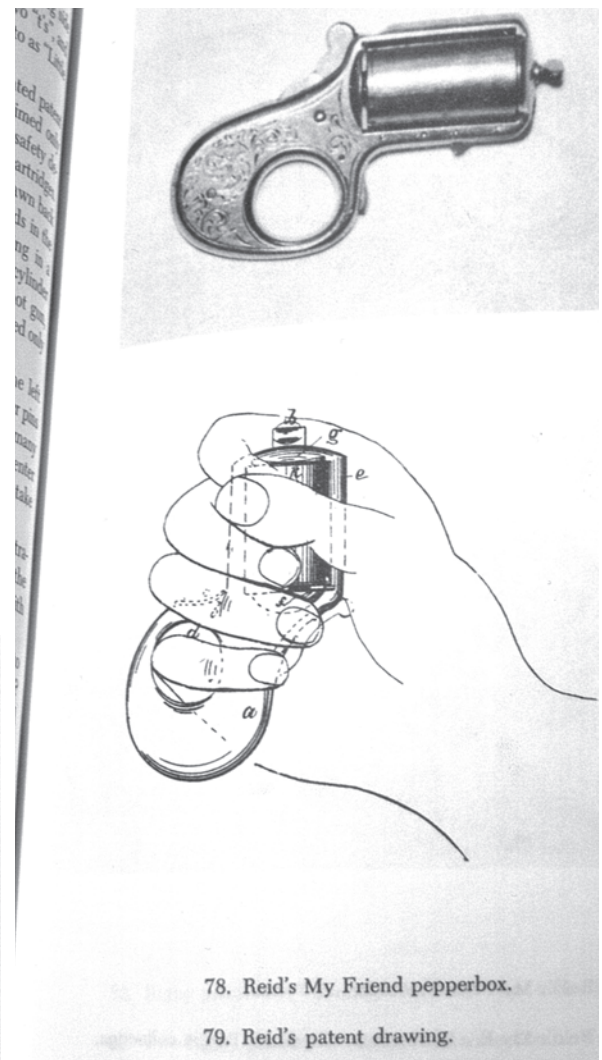


Figure 4. The Reid Knuckleduster, in the Knuckleduster Position.

.22 caliber 7 shot, rimfire, single action pepperbox by James Reid, patented 1865 (Figure 4). The Reid and the National Arms/Moore's Patent Derringer are the principle one-finger knuckledusters. The Reid, like a number of others in my collection, is so commonly seen now that it's lost most of its power to surprise and amaze us. This is a problem with



78. Reid's My Friend pepperbox.

79. Reid's patent drawing.

Figure 5. The Reid Patent Drawing (below), with the pistol in the Righthanded Knuckleduster Position. Above, the pistol in Standard Show Table Position (Winant, page 87).

2. SQUEEZER

A squeezer pistol is held in the palm and activated by squeezing a bar or a button. Note that this is a unique feature—basically all other pistols are fired by pulling something (generally called the trigger), but squeezers are activated by pushing. This distinction gives great pleasure to some Curiosa collectors.

The Gaulois (Figure 6), French, from the 1890's is a 5 shot 8 mm and one of the earliest mechanically (spring) fed firearms (Figure 7). In its advertising, it was called “automatic” or “semiautomatic,” though by modern definitions it's neither. It was sold with a soft purse (and less often found hard-cased or boxed). Decoration ranges from plain to highly ornate.

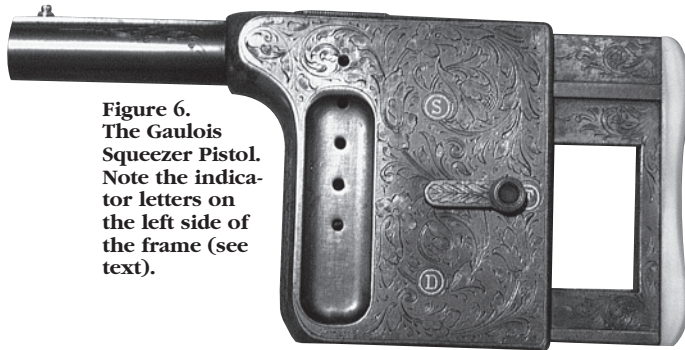


Figure 6. The Gaulois Squeezer Pistol. Note the indicator letters on the left side of the frame (see text).

For fun, ask all Gaulois sellers what the indicator letters on the left side mean. After a period of silence, politely inform them: S for “Surete” (safety), F for “Feu” (fire), D for “Dechargement et Demontage” (unloading and opening).

3. KNUCKLEDUSTER AND SQUEEZER

“The Green Avenger,” Barton, Canada/ Hong Kong, is a water pistol from the 1970s (Figure 8). This was my first Firearm Curiosa, found on a newspaper vending machine in Beverly Hills. It inspired me to collect Firearm Curiosus. I own another example IN THE ORIGINAL PACKAGE. Its designer must have known 19th century firearms, and I enjoy seeing old designs reappear and recycle.

4. COMBINATION WEAPON: KNIFE PISTOL, KNUCKLEDUSTER

“Apache” knuckleduster pistol, Liege, from the late 19th century (Figure 9). It has a pinfire pepperbox, folding blade, and knuckles. Said to be favored by Paris street gangs of the era (“apache” means not the Indian tribe, but rather “thug” or “gangster” in French), it was also sold to law-abiding (though perhaps adventurous) citizens for defense. It is a very nasty weapon. This example was made in Liege by the firm of Auguste Francotte, and (a rarity) proofed and sold in England.

5. SQUEEZER AND VERTICAL WHEEL PISTOL

Americans call these weapons turret pistols, but vertical ones don't look like turrets at all, so I use the English term “wheel.” The chamber is thin, round, and rotates

(either mechanically or by hand), and the charges radiate out from the center like spokes of a wheel.

From “The Protector” family of pistols, the Chicago Palm Pistol (Chicago Firearms Company), .32 cal, 7 shot, rimfire, was patented in 1893 (Figure 10). It's siblings include the French Turbiaux, and the Minneapolis Palm Pistol. This pistol suffers more than any other from overexposure. I will teach you four characteristics that will make it exciting for all of you once again:

- It is one of only three types of multishot firearms with a rotating chamber group that is not cylindrical, and the only wheel pistol. It is the only one with a

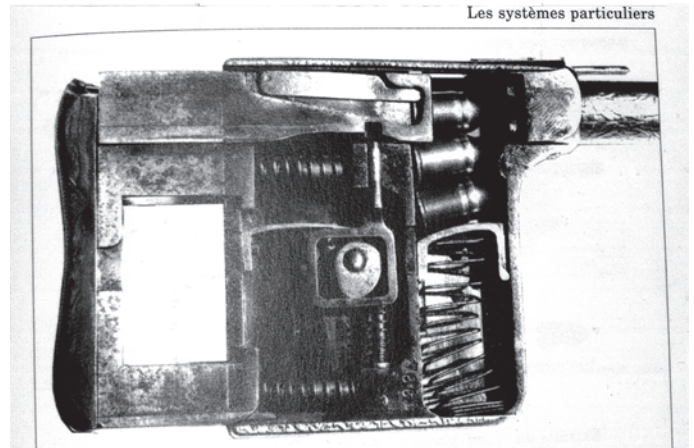


Figure 7. The Gaulois, opened, showing the mechanism (Singer, page 165).

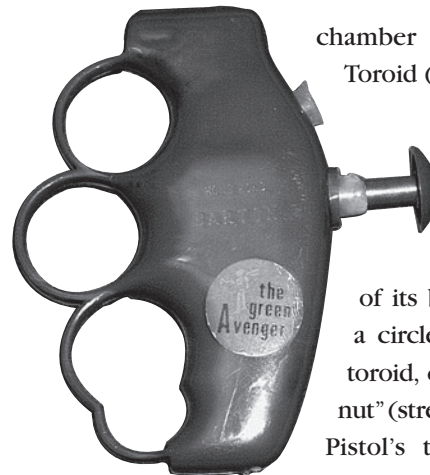


Figure 8. The Green Avenger.

chamber group in the shape of a Toroid (Figure 11).

To make a toroid, you take a two-dimensional closed shape and rotate it through the third dimension around an axis outside of its borders. If you do this with a circle, you get the most famous toroid, called a Torus, or the “doughnut” (street name). The Chicago Palm Pistol's toroidal chamber group is formed from a rectangle.

- Because this wheel is not a cylinder, it is the only wheel pistol that is rear-loaded, not front-loaded.

- As with the Reid, you have the opportunity with many Chicagos to carefully reposition them correctly on the show table (Figure 12).

- The Chicago Firearms Company pistols

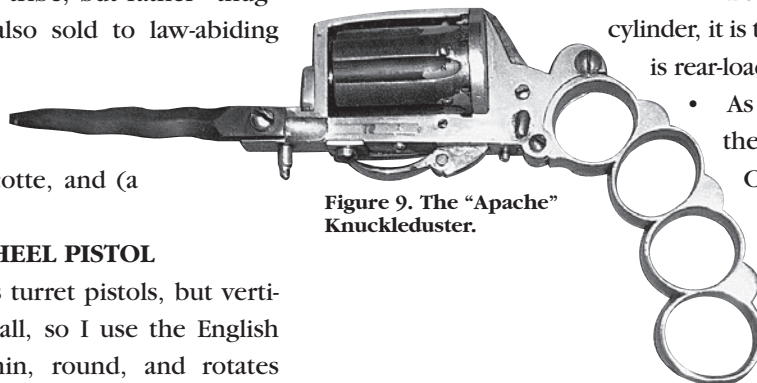


Figure 9. The “Apache” Knuckleduster.

Figure 10. The Chicago Palm Pistol, in Standard Show Table (incorrect) Position (see text).

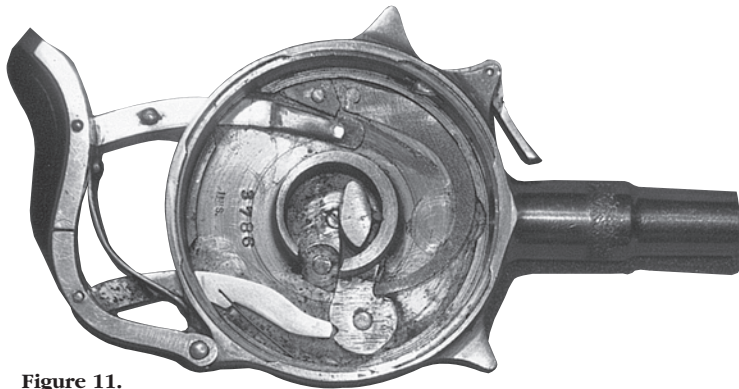
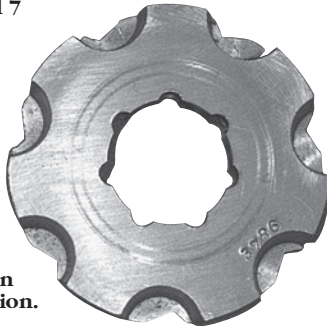


Figure 11. The Chicago Palm Pistol, with the toroidal 7 shot wheel displayed. Note the mechanism, including the central hammer (a knob on the front of the hammer, unseen here, does the detonating). The pistol is shown in the correct position.



were made by the Ames Sword Company, so owning one is a must for Ames collectors.

6. HORIZONTAL WHEEL PISTOL

This is a 10 shot, .42 cal, centerfire cartridge pistol by Heinrich Genhart, Liege, 1856 (Figure 13). The horizontal wheel position allowed proper sighting, but made a gun unwieldy and hard to carry (Figure 14). This is a pioneering centerfire cartridge firearm, the third earliest. The others are the Pauly system (France and England, 1812), and the Michallon, an early French transition revolver (1844).

The Genhart is a very rare and unusual pistol, and a collector's dream. It should appeal to everyone, since it's a multishot, hand-turned, horizontal revolving wheel, underhammer, internal striker, frontloading, gas-sealed, tube detonated, centerfire, metallic cartridge pistol.

7. VERTICAL WHEEL PISTOL

"The Noel" is a French double action pill lock revolver with a side hammer, (Figure 15) 10 shot, 7.5 mm, patent 1865. Note the mechanical safety, which falls by gravity as the side hammer is cocked. (This makes the Noel one of the few firearms that cannot be fired upside down.) Why use a wheel gun? They claimed the advantage of more fire per unit time using spare wheels which could be quickly changed. Vertical wheel pistols were flat and easily carried (Figure 16), but the wheel interfered with sighting. All wheel guns

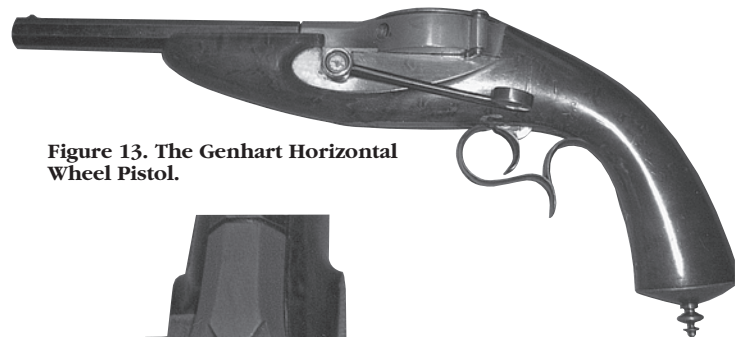


Figure 13. The Genhart Horizontal Wheel Pistol.

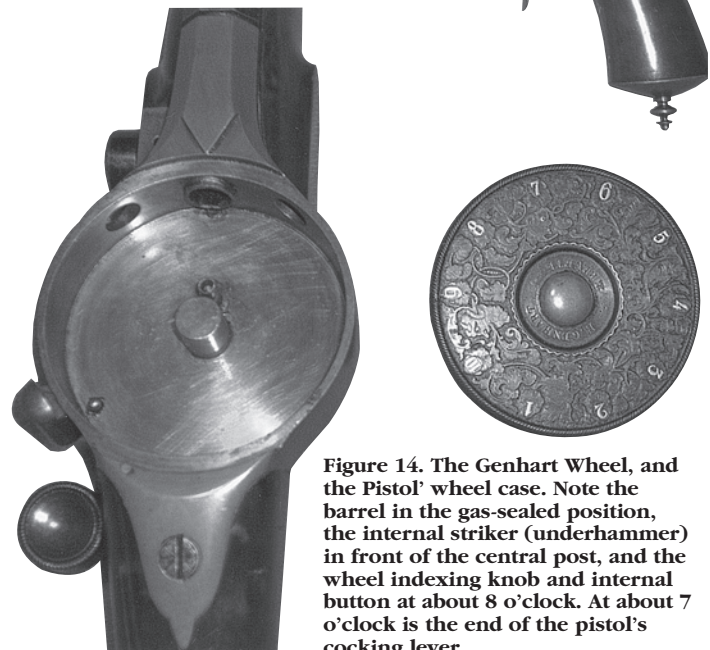


Figure 14. The Genhart Wheel, and the Pistol's wheel case. Note the barrel in the gas-sealed position, the internal striker (underhammer) in front of the central post, and the wheel indexing knob and internal button at about 8 o'clock. At about 7 o'clock is the end of the pistol's cocking lever.

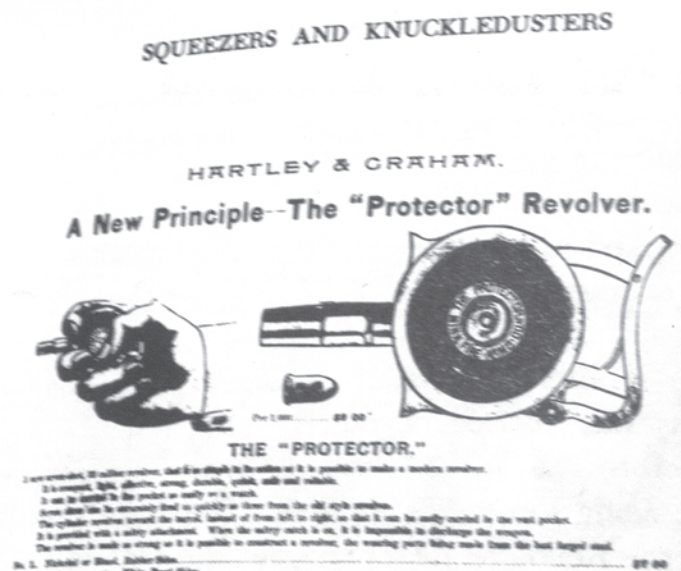


Figure 12. "Protector" Advertising, showing the Chicago Palm Pistol in the correct position.

carried the risk of multiple discharge, with chambers facing the user and bystanders.

8. VERTICOHORIZONTAL WHEEL PISTOL

Wheel guns are divided into 3 groups: vertical, horizontal, and verticohorizontal. The only known example of the latter, surviving in small numbers, is a Continental pistol with an unrecorded maker's mark and no name (Figure 17). Collectors can't even agree whether it is a pill lock or used a tube detonator. It is carried and displayed vertically, but we know from the sights on the right side of the wheel case and the barrel that it fired horizontally. This was a clever way to use the advantages of both wheel pistol types, and a wonderfully odd gun.

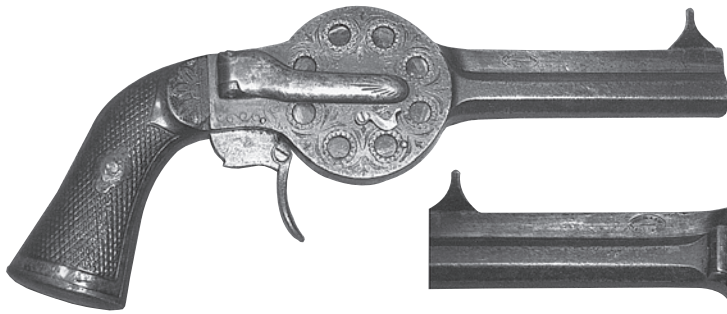


Figure 15. The Noel Vertical Wheel Pistol. Note the gravity-activated safety, here incomplete (the tip should be a small circle, which can hold the side-hammer's nose off the detonator).

9. SUPERIMPOSED LOAD PISTOL

Superimposed load firearms date from the 14th century, and use two or more charges in a single barrel. The purpose was more firepower in a smaller, lighter package. Their problems were: more complex construction (hence more expensive), the requirement of more careful and slower loading, and the danger of multiple discharges.

The Lindsay Pocket Pistol, 2 shot percussion, .41 cal., single barrel, is from 1860 (Figure 18). The right hammer falls first, detonating the forward charge; the left hammer then fires the rear charge. (The right detonating/flash carrying path is longer). Unusual aspects of the Lindsay include special dumbbell-shaped bullets, the (really bothersome) requirement to fill the bullet's indented mid-section with tal-low (presumably to keep the forward charge's explosion from igniting the back charge), the assurance in Lindsay literature that both shots can be safely fired at once with the left hammer, and an advertising claim of a 250 yard range.

10. TWO BARREL REVOLVER, AND MULTIPLE IN-LINE CHAMBERS

The Bar Pistol, by Burkhard Behr, Germany, was patented in 1898. 4 shot, .25 ACP (Figure 19). ("Bar" means "bear," simply a trade name.) The 4 chamber group is hand rotated, bringing the second two shots into line with the

two barrels (Figure 20). The trigger activates an internal rotating hammer, which strikes two firing pins in turn. Note that the Bar pistol is the second type of revolving chamber group firearm that does not employ a cylinder. The third type: chain guns. This pistol belongs in a chapter Winant did not write: multiple in-line barrels, or multiple in-line chambers. Other examples include the family of harmonica pistols and guns (some have one barrel with a sliding set of in-line chambers, others have a sliding set of multiple in-line barrels): the W. Marston 3 barrel pistol, the Reform (4 barrels), the Bayle (6 barrels), and the Jones (10 barrels).

11. DISGUISED OR HIDDEN FIREARMS, or CLANDESTINE WEAPONS, or FIREARMS BUILT INTO UTILITARIAN OBJECTS

A major, wildly popular Firearms Curiosa area. I do not own any of these pistols, but all are pictured in publications listed in the annotated bibliography. I've been able to find firearms disguised as, hidden in, or attached to these objects, and there must be many more: canes, purses (e.g. The Frankenau), watches, bicycle handles, books, keys, locks, boot jack (the Buszinger System), whips, pipes, pens, pen knives, rings, belt buckles, gloves, umbrellas, flashlights, fishhooks, ladles, and cigarette lighters.

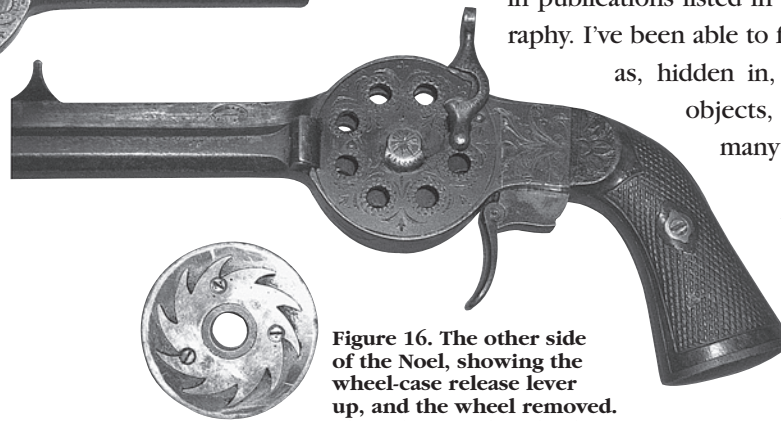


Figure 16. The other side of the Noel, showing the wheel-case release lever up, and the wheel removed. The ridges on the wheel allow the double-action mechanism to advance it.

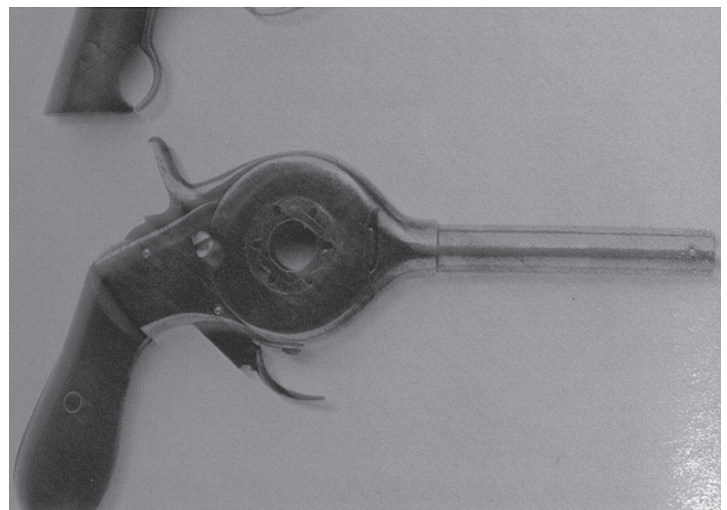


Figure 17. Continental Verticohorizontal Wheel Pistol (unknown maker). Note the rear sight, which doubles as the wheel case cover latch, and the front sight, both on the right side. (Christie's New York, May 21, 1986, lot 193.)

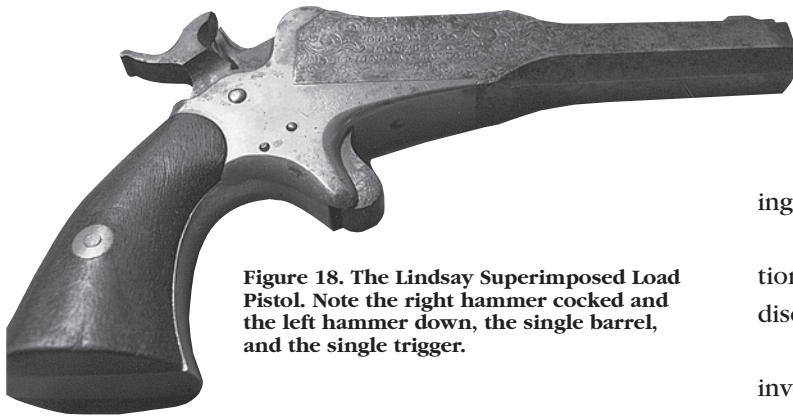


Figure 18. The Lindsay Superimposed Load Pistol. Note the right hammer cocked and the left hammer down, the single barrel, and the single trigger.

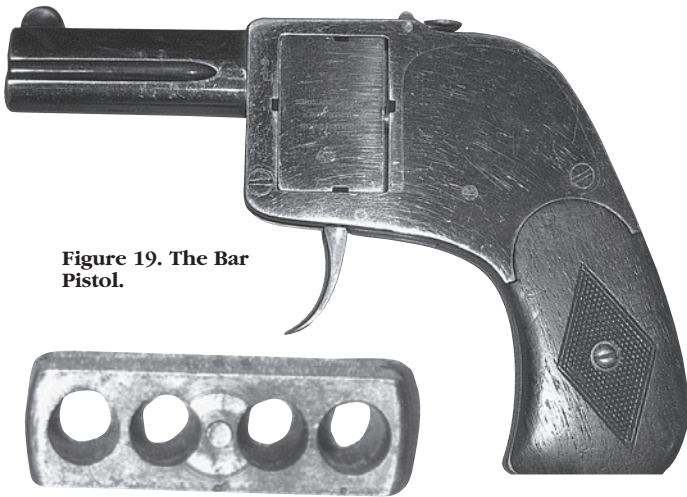


Figure 19. The Bar Pistol.

Figure 20. The Bar Pistol's 4 shot chamber block.

CONCLUSION

There is no "Firearms Curiosa" section in Flayderman's Guide. These guns are scattered throughout, which is true to the nature and reality of the 19th century firearms industry. The makers of these firearms did not set out to create oddities or to play jester to 21st century antique arms collectors. They were creative, inventive entrepreneurs, out to sell a lot of guns and exploit a market niche. Many failed, but some were successful. These weapons are viewed as part of the continuum of rampant 19th century capitalism.

These men worked hard to sell their products, and a limited number of themes emerge from their patent claims and their advertisements:

FIREARMS CURIOSA COMMERCE—RECURRENT THEMES

1. Self defense
2. Hiding/concealment
3. No gap between chamber and cylinder (better function, less power loss)
4. More shots
5. More shots, less time

6. More shots, less weight
7. Flat
8. Very flat

Finally, it's time to consider:

FIREARMS CURIOSA—REASONS TO COLLECT

1. Pleasure of technical achievement, imagination, ingenuity, entrepreneurship.
2. Pleasure of intense organization and subcategorization. Ideal for the collector with mild obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).
3. Enjoyment of the combination of the ugly and the inventive; appreciation of the beauty of dissonance.
4. Astonishment and pleasure of viewers, even those who do not own these firearms.
5. Still relatively affordable.

I recommend the collecting of Firearms Curiosa to you, whether as a primary focus or an affordable sideline. Many wonderful firearms await us, some known, and some we haven't even imagined.

As always, I welcome questions and comments, at mms615@yahoo.com

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