

Engraved Remington No.1 Rolling Block Sporting and Target Rifles

By Roy Marcot

In the mid-1850s, E. Remington & Sons did not have a gun designer in its employ. However, Eliphalet Remington would soon be successful in attracting three of the 19th century's finest to Ilion: Fordyce Beals, Joseph Rider and Dr. William Elliot.

In the late 1850s, Joseph Rider was a gunsmith residing in Newark, Ohio. On May 3, 1859, he was issued a U.S. patent for a double-action revolving pistol, and he assigned a two-thirds interest in this patent to two new business partners, John D. Martin and Andrew J. Dildine. Fortunately for the Village of Ilion, they chose E. Remington & Sons Armory to manufacture their revolvers. Joseph Rider was sent by his partners to Ilion to supervise Remington's work. The Mohawk Valley was to be his home for many years to come.

Around 1861, Rider was induced to assign his patent rights to the Ilion Armory and enter the employ of E. Remington & Sons. Rider continued development of different breech loading designs, and sometime in 1863 perfected a *split-breech* pistol. He obtained U.S. Patent #40,887 on December 8, 1863, for a breech loading system with the block *swinging backward and downward*. While it appeared similar to Leonard Geiger's U.S. Patent #37,501, issued on January 27, 1863, it was sufficiently different to warrant a separate patent. Even though Rider's patent drawings portray a *split-breech* pistol, Rider was encouraged to design a long arm on this unique system which could be saleable to the military. On October 14, 1864, E. Remington & Sons purchased half of Joseph Rider's patent rights for his upcoming new improvement in firearms—a true *rolling block* design—U.S. Patent #45,123 of November 15, 1864. Two months later, on December 16, 1864, Remington purchased half of Rider's patent rights for the upcoming new improvement in firearms—U.S. Patent #45,797, issued January 3, 1865, for a breech loading rifle.

Not wishing any possibility of infringement upon Leonard Geiger's U.S. Patent #37,501, issued January 27, 1863, for a crude rolling block type action, Remington struck a deal on September 1, 1865, with Charles C. Alger, a former partner of Leonard Geiger. The signed contract meant that Remington would pay a royalty of 50¢ to Alger for each Remington-Rider split-breech firearm made.

Joseph Rider developed the Remington split-breech system during the Civil War, adapting it to both small frame and large frame carbines. Rider's *split-breech* design, however, was inherently weak because the hammer penetrated the block en route to the cartridge, and the weapon could not be



relied upon as a breech system to handle more powerful cartridges. Rider continued to experiment with various methods of locking the breech and on December 16, 1864, submitted his design to the patent office. On January 3, 1865, he was issued the first patent for what would evolve into the famous Remington rolling block action, #45,797. Although the patent drawing shows an external hammer, the concept was established—it had a camming, locking action.

The close of America's Civil War resulted in chaos for hundreds of arms and munitions suppliers throughout the northern states. Armories such as Colt's Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing Company, the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company, the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company, the Whitneyville Armory, and E. Remington & Sons received the dreaded order from the Federal Ordnance Department to cease all deliveries, except in very special instances. To survive in the new peacetime economy, Remington needed to develop a breech loading weapon system desirable to the U.S. Ordnance Department, even though government arsenals were glutted with over a million new and used muzzle-loading arms. The prospect was not very promising, and the Remington works fell into a depression for many months after the war ended.

The late 1860s were years of dramatic change for America, particularly as a result of westward expansion. The great migration west impacted not only the brave men and women who made the journey, but also the thousands of easterners and mid-westerners who supported the migration: the wagon makers, the provisioners, the cloth makers and those who made and sold firearms and munitions. The



Figure 1. Engraved Remington No. 1 Creedmoor Long Range Target Rifle – Exhibition Grade with Rigby Flats. (Floyd Everhart collection)

settlement of the American west also fueled a basic interest in hunting and target shooting. Those living away from the crowded cities relied upon their hunting skills to keep fresh meat on their tables, and keep their hard-earned money for other necessities. Guns were needed that could shoot straight and would provide years of utility in the field. By the 1850s, target shooting had steadily grown from local contests of skill to organized events that drew competitors from other counties and even neighboring states. Unfortunately, most accurate weapons of the 1850s and '60s were hand-crafted, muzzleloading rifles that were unaffordable for most citizens. America's passion for shooting soon demanded better firearms at more affordable prices. Remington responded to these needs with the soon-to-be famous Remington rolling block rifle.

The rifle we now call the *rolling block* was originally called *the Remington System* by E. Remington & Sons in the 1860s and '70s. In fact, it was not until 1874 that the company adopted the more recognizable term *No.1 action* for the large frame sporting rifle.

Just when E. Remington & Sons began producing large frame sporting rifles based on the rolling block action is not known, as production records of the company were destroyed decades ago. However, it is believed that Remington began to make a limited number of sporting rifles for public sale in 1868, although they were never cataloged. In fact, Remington did not start

manufacturing sporting rifles in any quantity until the early 1870s. This was because the armory was running night and day producing tens of thousands of military rifles for Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Japan, Egypt and Spain. Remington



Figure 2. Engraved Remington No. 1 Creedmoor Long Range Target Rifle – D Grade. (Leroy Merz collection)



Figure 3. Engraved Remington No. 1 Creedmoor Long Range Target Rifle – Special Order. (Leroy Merz collection)

management must have asked: *Why tool up to make a thousand sporting rifles when the same equipment and manpower could produce tens of thousands of military rifles?* Therefore, Remington put the majority of its production effort into making military weapons. Because of this, domestic competitors such as Winchester were able to dominate the American civilian sporting arms market in the 1870s and '80s.

Without a doubt, the rarest and most desirable Remington rolling block rifles were factory-engraved No.1 sporting or target rifles. E. Remington & Sons manufactured a relatively small number of engraved guns compared with the 12,000+ No.1 sporting and target rifles produced between 1868 and 1891. Why the proprietors did not make more engraved rifles is not known, but it might be explained by the pragmatic

nature of the three owners, Philo, Samuel and Eliphalet III. The Remingtons were practical businessmen and had little of the sales flare of the late Samuel Colt, who took the marketing of firearms to unprecedented levels in the 1850s.

As the original production records of E. Remington & Sons no longer exist, one can only speculate on why each engraved rifle was built and for whom each was intended. From an examination of surviving specimens, it is clear that no two rifles were alike in engraving patterns or specialized features such as figured wood, sights, or other high-grade features. Only a few rifles have engraved escutcheon plates

with names and/or dates, and only one has the owner's name engraved in gold on the barrel.

Equally enigmatic is the question of the identity of the engraver, as only one prominent engraver, Louis Daniel



Figure 4. Engraved Early Remington No. 1 Sporting Rifle – Exhibition Grade.



Figure 5. Engraved Remington Exhibition Grade No. 1 Sporting Rifle. (Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History)

Nimschke, left a record of the Remington No.1 rifles he engraved in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Nimschke, one of the finest engravers of American firearms in the 19th Century, left his record book complete with notations and engraving pulls. From this vast storehouse of knowledge we learn that Nimschke did not always sign his work, or if he did, his mark (usually his initials) was engraved in a different place on each gun.

The engraving of firearms is considered to be the highest form of decoration, reserved for a manufacturer's most important customers or valued celebrities. The technical procedure of engraving involved the initial artistic design conceived by the engraver, and many times unique to a particular firearm, as in the work of L. D. Nimschke. Production line engravers frequently

adopted a common engraving style replicated on dozens or hundreds of firearms (as may be found in the high-grade Ballards) by contract engraving houses. Nimschke's case, however, illustrates the artistry of a master.

L. D. Nimschke was born in Germany in July 1832, and emigrated to America around 1850. Little is known about his training or early experience as an engraver, and the first record shows him living in New York City from 1861 until 1891, moving to Brooklyn sometime around 1893, and passing away on April 9, 1904. Once established as an engraver in the city, he evidently did not move. He

worked independently, as evidenced by the list of more than 100 customers in his engraving record book (reprinted by Rowe Publications).



Figure 6. Engraved Remington Sporting Rifle. (Formerly in the Jack Appel collection)



Figure 7. Engraved Remington No. 1 Sporting Rifle. (Leroy Merz collection)

As R. L. Wilson wrote in *L. D. Nimschke - Firearms Engraver*:

Nimschke's customers were leading manufacturing companies and dealers, many smaller manufacturers and gunsmiths, shooting clubs, private individuals, and various persons and firms outside the sphere of firearms. The Nimschke record gives proof that he worked directly for Remington since factory presentations are presented.

Nimschke's engraving included both the rich and bold American style and the fine and delicate English style. Wilson described the "American style" as *primarily smoothly-flowing foliate scroll work with occasional animal motifs, of which the wolf head is best known. The background commonly is a punched-dot mat, or sometimes hatching.*



Figure 8. Close up of rifles above.

According to the record book, L. D. Nimschke engraved rolling block rifles for E. Remington & Sons as early as 1868, but these guns are believed to be embellished military presentation rifles, not sporters. The record book does illustrate several examples of Nimschke's work on Remington rolling block sporting rifles, each engraved in 1873.

In this article are pictured a number of engraved Remington No.1 sporting or target rifles. You will notice that no two rifles are alike, and each differs in the style and coverage of engraving, the quality of the special wood, and optional features. E. Remington & Sons' catalogs and price-lists of the

1870s and 1880s did not give very much information about what could be special ordered, nor were precise prices



Figure 9. Engraved Early Remington Round Top Sporting Rifle. (Ed Canzano II collection)

quoted. It is believed that special customers or dignitaries could special order an engraved rifle in almost any configuration

they wanted. The pictures that grace these pages give testimony to that endeavor.

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The author also wishes to thank the current owners of the fine engraved rifles who allowed us to photograph them. I also acknowledge the outstanding photography of Tom Rowe and Ron Paxton. And lastly, I recognize the graphic arts ability of Ron Paxton in grouping the pictures into such an

artistic matrix. There is no doubt that Ron has set a new standard in the presentation of gun photography.



Figure 10. Engraved Remington Round Top Schuetzen Target Rifle. (Ron Peterson collection)