

RARE AMERICAN CARBINES: THE WINCHESTER SINGLE SHOT

by Jeff Goodson

Photos by Amy Cartee-Cox unless otherwise noted.



Figure 1. Winchester Single Shot carbine profiles. Serial Number 79506; author's collection.

The Winchester Repeating Arms Company was one of the most successful and prolific American arms manufacturers of the post-Civil War era. Its *forte* was a long run of lever action repeating rifles and carbines that became synonymous with the American west. Just one carbine in that long line of iconic firearms failed in the American market – the Winchester Single Shot, also known as the Model 1885 (Figure 1).

Ironically, the Single Shot in other configurations – rifle, Schuetzen rifle and musket – was wildly successful. Created by famous firearms inventor John M. Browning, nearly 140,000 were manufactured by Winchester from 1885 to 1920.¹ Indeed it was so popular that it has been described as “the most revered, emulated and enduring single-shot rifle in modern history.”² The single shot carbine, however, was never able to compete with repeating carbines for the hearts of those who settled the American west. A total of just 409 are recorded as having been manufactured from 1888-1911. And, because most of them were shipped to Australia, the Single Shot carbine today is exceptionally rare in the American collector market.³

Background

Many books have been written about various aspects of the evolution of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company (W.R.A.). They trace its history from the Hunt Volition Repeater (~1847-1848) through the Jennings and Smith-Jennings rifles (~1849-1852), the Smith and Wesson lever action repeating pistols (~1854-1855) and the repeating pistols and carbines of the Volcanic Repeating Arms Co. (~1855-1857). Oliver Winchester was a stockholder at Volcanic, and when it became insolvent in 1857 he bought the company

assets and reorganized it as the New Haven Arms Company. He was chief executive officer there from 1860-1866, making pistols, carbines and the new .44 caliber Henry repeating rifle that proved itself spectacularly in the Civil War. In 1866 he changed the name of the company to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company.⁴

After the Civil War, the company boomed. Its Henry rifle had proven both the superiority of breechloading firearms using metallic cartridges and the tactical dominance of repeating arms. Winchester was perfectly staged to take commercial advantage of this success after the war, and did. Over the next 35 years, it dominated the domestic market for lever action long arms. It manufactured hundreds of thousands of repeaters in seven models: the Models 1866, 1873, 1876, 1886, 1892, 1894 and 1895. The only other carbines produced by Winchester in the 19th century were the Single Shot carbine, and three models of six-shot, bolt action Winchester-Hotchkiss carbines made from 1879-1899 for both military and civilian use.⁵

Winchester's Carbine Competition, 1865-1900

To be sure, Winchester wasn't without competition. Economic development and the rapid movement of settlers pushing west after the Civil War created huge demand for reliable shoulder arms. The U.S. government abruptly suspended the procurement of new guns after Appomattox, and over the coming years Winchester solidified its competitive niche in the domestic market as its competition atrophied.

Spencer made its last carbine about 1868. Sharps struggled to stay relevant with single shot firearms, and finally folded in 1881. Its last production carbine was the Sharps-Borchardt Model 1878,

made from 1878-1880. Very large surpluses of both Sharps and Spencer Civil War carbines in government inventory – over 31,000 Sharps and over 15,000 Spencers – were ordered modified after the war and issued to troops in the west for fighting the Indian wars. These were replaced by Springfield trapdoor carbines starting in the early 1870s, although a few continued to serve state militias and military support personnel into the 1890s.⁶

The Providence Tool Company made the Peabody rimfire carbine from 1866-1871, and a Peabody-Martini carbine from 1878-1884 that for a brief period was successful in some foreign military markets. The Whitney Arms Company made ten models of carbines after the Civil War, but production for half of them was 200 or less. Three models were made in the low- to mid-thousands in the 1880s, but none were made after 1888 when the company was bought out by Winchester.

Three brand new companies started making carbines after the Civil War with mixed success. Evans made lever action repeating carbines from 1874-1879 before falling into bankruptcy. Bullard made very high-quality rifles and carbines from 1883-1888, but they never achieved standardization; by 1890 they were pushed out of the market by competition from Winchester and Marlin. Savage Arms, which started making carbines in 1896, was far more successful and continued production under that name until 2015.

Four Civil War-era companies managed to survive the post-war era along with Winchester. Ethan Allen and its successor company Forehand and Wadsworth continued into the 20th century, but stopped making its drop-breech rimfire carbine in the 1870s. Ballard carbines were made by four different companies until about 1869. A fifth company, the Brown Manufacturing Company, continued making Ballard rifles until failing in 1873. John M. Marlin took over the operations until 1881 when it incorporated as the famous Marlin Firearms Company. Marlin started making high quality carbines in 1889, and was one of the most successful competitors with Winchester for the domestic lever action market well into the 20th century.

Colt had a long history of carbine production dating back to the seminal Model 1839 revolving carbine. It also made a popular revolving carbine from about 1856-1864. After the Civil War, Colt experimented with Berdan carbines from 1866-1870 and made the Colt Burgess carbine from 1883-1885. It was far more successful with the Colt Lightning slide-action magazine carbines, which it made from about 1884-1902.

Based strictly on the numbers, Remington was the most successful carbine manufacturer after the war. It made ten different models of production carbines from about 1865 through the end of the century. One used a split-breech action, five used a rolling block action and four used a bolt action. After delivering on a U.S. order of 20,000 split-breech carbines in 1865-1866, Remington came out with its hugely successful rolling block action. This simple, rugged action found great favor with militaries all over the world, including twenty countries in Latin America alone from 1868-1900.⁷ Remington sold over a million single shot military rifles and carbines from 1867-1888, and over a hundred thousand more rifles and carbines from 1888-1921.⁸ Direct competition between Remington and Winchester was limited, however, because of Remington's focus on the international military market and Winchester's focus on the domestic civilian market.

Total Estimated Carbine Production: 409

The leading Winchester Arms Collectors Association (WACA) historian on the Single Shot, Bert Hartman, has collected and researched this model since the early 1980s. His work includes detailed analysis of the corporate archives on the model at the Cody Firearms Museum, and examination of the individual records of 109,999 serial numbers from the original factory warehouse ledgers. Hartman's research indicates that a total of just 409 carbines were made, 389 in low wall configuration and 20 in high wall configuration. Just 294 were made prior to January 1, 1900, with the balance of 115 made after that. Production ended in 1911.⁹

Carbine Development

Winchester's Single Shot was designed by John Moses Browning (Figure 2) and his brother Jonathan Edmund Browning in Ogden, Utah in the late 1870s. It was the first single shot rifle produced by Winchester, which bought the patent rights from Browning in late 1883. The Browning brothers had already made about 600 rifles or partial rifles based on an 1879 patent (Figure 3), and Winchester bought the patent rights, unsold guns and parts that had already been made.¹⁰ It was the start of a long and fruitful relationship; for the next nineteen years, Browning sold his patents – including for the Models 1886, 1892, 1894 and 1895 rifles and carbines – exclusively to Winchester.¹¹

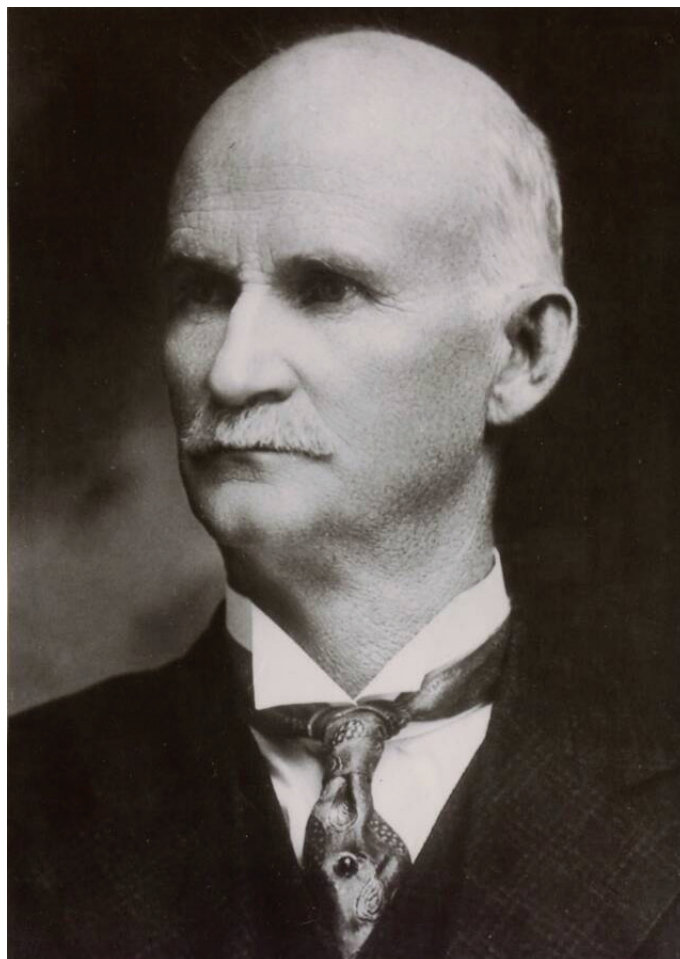


Figure 2. John Moses Browning.

J. M. BROWNING.
Breech-Loading Fire-Arm.

No. 220,271.

Patented Oct. 7, 1879.

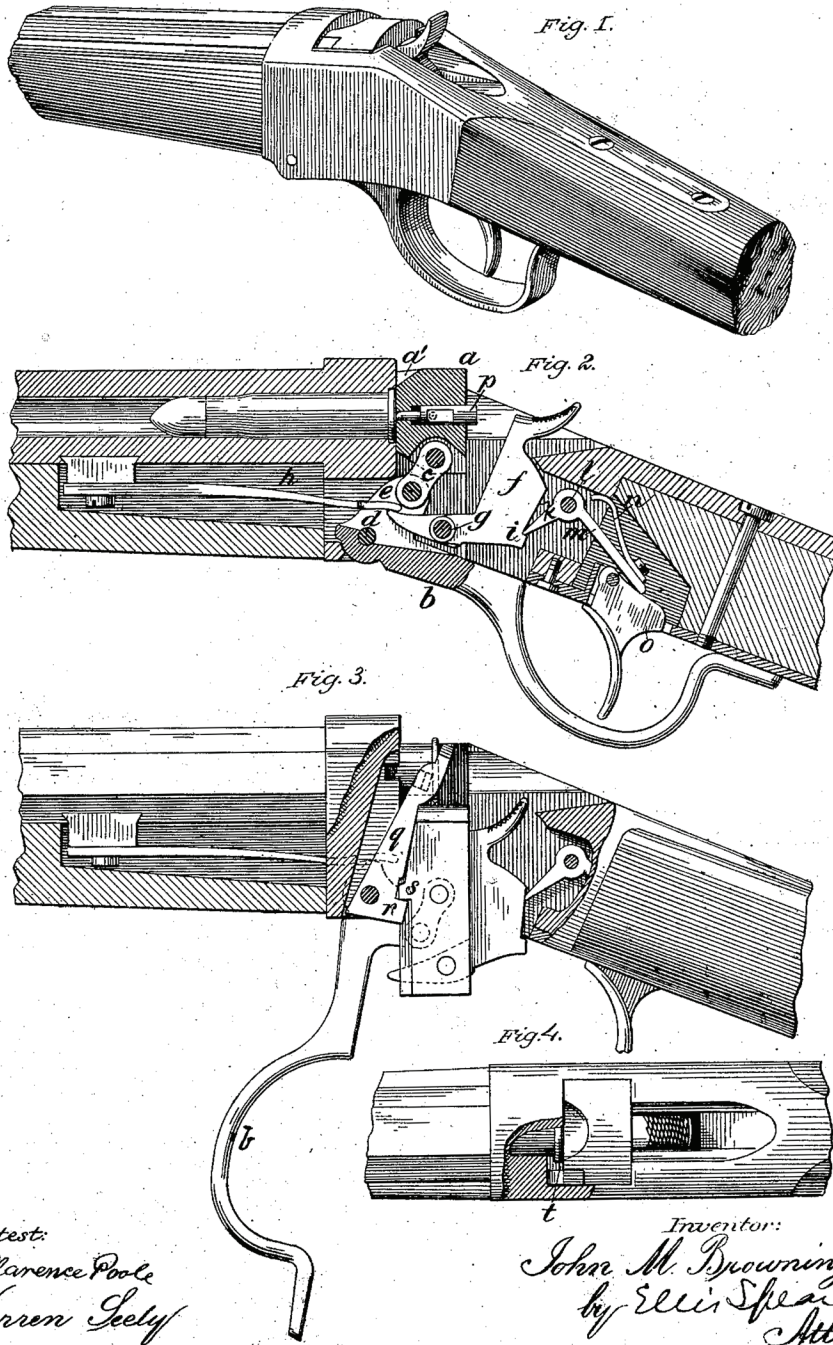


Figure 3. John M. Browning Patent #220,271, showing internal mechanics. Patent was issued October 7, 1879.

Attest:
Clarence Poole
Warren Seely

Inventor:
John M. Browning
by Ellis Spear
Atty

Despite the tremendous success of the lever-action repeater, single shot rifles also had their proponents in the 1880s – not least because none of the early repeaters could handle the heavy ammunition that many shooters preferred for long range and effectiveness against big game. In September 1885, after decades of exclusive devotion to the production of repeating firearms, Winchester started making the lever action Single Shot rifle. This added a new rifle to Winchester’s line of arms that was capable of handling the .45-70 Government cartridge in addition to both heavier and lighter loads. It also contributed to the diversity of Winchester firearms

without competing directly with the company’s repeating rifles, and it offered the possibility of replacing the Sharps single-shot guns after Sharps shut down in 1881.¹² Winchester made the Single Shot model from 1885-1920, when it was officially dropped from the W.R.A. line of arms.¹³

Major Variants

The Winchester Single Shot is classified into two variants, the high wall and low wall, depending on whether the walls of the frame conceal the breechblock. Also distinguished are thick-side



Figure 4. Winchester Single Shot carbine serial number 79506 with action open, right side (upper left) and left side (upper right). Bottom view of carbine with action open and serial number markings (bottom left) and top view of carbine with action open showing extractor and internal mechanics (bottom right).

or thin-side frames – occurring with both high walls and low walls – based on whether or not the frame flares out to meet the stock. Both high wall and low wall guns came in a tremendously wide variety of calibers, barrel lengths and weights, finishes, stocks, sights and levels of embellishment. The carbine, however, was officially produced in just two basic configurations: a high wall, and a lightweight single shot low wall carbine. A special order out of Australia in 1909 established a third variant, referred to by Hartman as “quasi carbine-rifles.”¹⁴ The Single Shot carbine is shown in Fig-

ures 1 and 4; vital statistics for the carbine are shown in Table 1.

High Wall Carbines. High wall carbines were the first single shot guns made in carbine configuration. A slightly heavier No. 2 round barrel was used for them since they had 20” barrels and chambered heavier calibers of ammunition. Only twenty were produced. The first thirteen were made in April 1888; ten of these were chambered in .44 WCF and three in .40-60 WCF. In May 1885 another three were produced in .40-60 WCF. All sixteen had saddle rings and a rifle-style butt, and were exported to Australia;

Table 1

Winchester Single Shot Carbines	
Maker:	Winchester Repeating Arms Company, New Haven, CN
Flayderman ID:	5K-117
Years Made:	~1888-1911
Total Estimated Production:	409 through 1911; 294 before January 1, 1900
Estimated Survival Rate:	Estimated at 15% (Hartman 2021 ¹⁵)
Known Survival Rate (KSR):	~8.8% as of 2021
Loading Port:	Breech
Breech Action:	Lever action
Ignition System:	Cartridge
Ammunition:	“Vast majority” in .44 WCF (Hartman); .44 standard after 1898 (Madis ¹⁶). Also found in .32 WCF and .38 WCF, and other calibers by special order (Hartman; Madis ¹⁷).
Shot Capacity:	Single shot
Rifling:	6 lands and grooves, right twist
Barrel Form and Length:	Round; 15”, 16”, 18” and 20”
Front Sight:	Pinned blade in block
Rear Sight:	Carbine style; ladder calibrated to 900 yards
Attachments:	Saddle ring attached to left side of frame on most made pre-1900

at least two are known to survive. The other four high wall carbines were special order or experimental specimens, made subsequently in various calibers.¹⁵

Lightweight Carbines. Of the 409 Single Shot carbines, 389 (95.1%) were of the “lightweight single shot carbine” variant. These were single shot, lever action breech loaders with fast tapered round barrels. The first two low wall carbines documented in the records were serial numbers 28988 and 28989, manufactured in September 1888 in .32 WCF with 20” barrels. No information exists on where they were shipped.¹⁶

The standard barrel length for the Lightweight Carbine was 15”, rifled with six lands and grooves and a right twist. Barrels were also made in 16”, 18” and 20” lengths. These carbines have the flat-sided low wall receiver frames; a standard pinned blade-in-block front sight; a factory carbine ladder rear sight calibrated to 900 yards; a plain forearm tip (no ebony wedge); a carbine butt plate; and a saddle ring held by a stud threaded into the receiver. The standard caliber, found on 340 of the 389 guns, was the .44 WCF. Five were in .22 WCF, thirty-nine in .32 WCF, and five in .38 WCF. The caliber is marked on the top of the barrel at the breech. The vast majority were chambered in .44 WCF after 1898.¹⁷

Winchester listed the Lightweight Carbine as late as its March 1909 catalogue, and continued to manufacture them until 1911. The highest known serial number is 112450, made in late December 1911.⁹ A scanned copy of the April 1900 Winchester catalog No. 65 depicting the Lightweight Carbine and the standard features is found as Figure 5.

Quasi Carbine-Rifles. In addition to the standard Lightweight Carbine configuration, Winchester manufactured at least seventeen “quasi carbine-rifles” in 1909 to fill a special order from Australia. These had the same 15” fast taper barrels, but with no saddle ring, and a standard rifle butt with crescent butt plate. Although listed by Winchester in their ledger records as “rifles,” Hartman included them in his survey as more traditional carbines.⁹

Serial and Assembly Numbers

The Winchester Single Shot is serial numbered from 1 on up, with high wall and lightweight carbines numbered in the same range. The serial number is found on the lower tang, changing from script to block numerals at about serial number 107000. Serial numbers under 82382 were manufactured prior to January 1, 1899.¹⁶

Assembly numbers may or may not be found on these carbines. When present, they are known to occur on the inside of the lower tang, on the stock under the upper tang, and on the butt plate. Assembly numbers were chosen at random like those of other models of Winchester.¹⁸

Principal U.S. Inspection Marks

None; no Winchester Single Shot arms were procured by the U.S. government.

Survival and Rarity

Fewer Winchester Single Shot carbines were made through the end of the 19th century than any other Winchester model (Table 2). The total estimated production for the Single Shot was estimated by Flayderman at 139,725, Hartman puts the number at



Figure 5. April 1900 Winchester Catalog No. 65 depicting Lightweight Carbine and standard features (top gun). Courtesy of WACA Historian Bert Hartman.

Table 2

19th Century Winchester Carbine Production			
Model	Approximate Years of Production	Total Estimated Carbine Production Through 1899	Sources/Notes
Volcanic Repeating Arms Co.			
Pistol-Carbine	1855-1857	300 or less	Lewis & Rutter (2011) p. 59. ¹⁹
Lever Action Carbine	1855-1857	Unknown; 1 known survivor	Lewis & Rutter (2011) p.62 et seq. ²⁰
New Haven Arms Co.			
Pistol-Carbine	1857-1860	Unknown; very rare	Lewis & Rutter (2011) pp. 83-84. ²¹ Made from leftover parts.
Lever Action Carbine	1857-1860	~1000	Lewis & Rutter (2011) p. 81. ²²
Winchester Repeating Arms Co.			
1886	1866-1898	~129,898	76.37% of total production. Cody data.
1873	1873-1919	~93,460	~17.27% of total production through 1899. Reabe (2023). ²³
1876	1876-1897	9,623	Houze (2001). ²⁴
Hotchiss 1st Model	1879-1880	1,879	Curlovic (2022). ²⁵ 500 to U.S. military.
Hotchkiss 2nd Model	1880-1899	1,296	Curlovic (2022). ²⁵ 500 to U.S. military.
Hotchkiss 3rd Model	1883-1889	1,561	Curlovic (2022). ²⁵
<i>Single Shot aka Model 1885</i>	1885-1920	294	409 made through 1909. Hartman (2001); (2024). ⁹
1886	1886-1935	~6,660	Madl (2018). ²⁶ Based on available factory records only.
1892	1892-1941	~40,295	Puzio (2023). ²⁷ 31% of total production through 1899.
1894	1894-Present	~16,830	Hartman (2021). ¹⁵ 21% of total production through 1899.
1895	1896-1931	~953	12.5% of total 1898 production + 10.0% of total 1899 production. Model 1895 produced until 1933. (Dunbar 2024; Kassab & Dunbar p. 60). ²⁸

about 140,000.²⁹ The total production of 409 carbines therefore constitutes just 0.29% of total production. Hartman, noting that “more than two dozen and closer to three dozen” are known to survive, has qualitatively estimated the survival rate of Model 1885 carbines at around 15%.¹⁵ Assuming 36 known survivors out of a total production of 409 guns yields a known survival rate (KSR) of about 8.8% as of 2021.

The biggest factors driving the rarity of Single Shot carbines today is their very low production at just 409 guns, and hard use overseas. The very low production is due to the clear lack of demand for them in America. While other configurations of the model were hugely successful, the carbines simply weren’t popular and couldn’t compete with Winchester and Marlin repeating carbines in the American west.³⁰

The overseas market was a different story, and most Single Shot carbines were exported. While Jones writes that some were exported to South America,³¹ it appears that the majority of them went to Australia. A substantial number of the 389 low wall carbines were exported there, and most survivors have been found there.¹⁶

Campbell writes that “while most any variation of the single-shot can be encountered in Australia, a sizable number of them seem to be low-wall lightweight carbines.” He notes that the “baby carbine low-wall” was very popular there in the Australian outback. The single shot was often known in Australia as a ‘Selectors’ rifle, a term that is roughly analogous to the 19th century American homesteader.

“They trekked into the Australian bush, selected their piece of property, and began turning it into their own ranch or “station” as the Aussies call it. Part of that effort was the raising of crops, which often had to be protected from animals.

“Few Selectors could afford a repeater to do the job, but a good many could stretch their meager income far enough to buy a single shot. Generally, it was a low-wall carbine. They were cheap, accurate, handy and used the least costly types of ammunition. Not only were these rifles used to deter crop predation but to feed families who often survived on a steady diet of rabbit and kangaroo.

“...The single shot occasionally found its way into the hands of the infamous. In 1899 the noted Australian outlaw Joe Governor killed a bloke, took the fellow’s .32-20 low-wall and went on a rampage. More people died. Governor and his brother Jimmy were finally shot to death by authorities between Pokolbin and Singleton, Australia. Joe Governor was still carrying the little low-wall when he met his maker.”³²

While it’s tempting to ascribe some of the attrition of the Single Shot carbines to Australia’s firearm confiscation policy – and some may have indeed met that fate – Hartman cautions that “it is mostly an urban myth that the Australian government confiscated all privately owned firearms. Specifically, Australia instituted a

licensing system for all ‘collectable’ firearms, and it is perfectly legal to own them after getting government approval.”¹⁵

Winchester’s Single Shot carbine is in very high demand among American antique firearms collectors, especially Winchester, Winchester Single Shot and carbine collectors generally. This has helped ensure the survival of newly identified specimens, and limited further modification of surviving guns. The main factors driving this demand are its great rarity; its lack of availability to the American collector; the *cachet* of the Winchester name; the John Browning connection and the special interest that attends this particular model of Winchester.

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