

THE FRANKENAU PURSE REVOLVER

by Marc Gorelick

Gunmakers are clever adapters and innovators who, over the years, have used their imaginations and skills to make a plethora of disguised weapons. Few objects have been overlooked that can conceal a firearm. Inventors know that the chances for surprise attack go up when the disguise for the gun looks innocent. Disguised guns have been limited only by the imagination of their inventors. Guns have been disguised as, or hidden in, various seemingly innocuous implements, including buggy whip handles, bicycle handles, umbrellas, books, locks, keys, pens, pipes, belt buckles, gloves, hats, and canes. For instance, in the United States perhaps the most popular cane gun was the Remington Cane Gun. As pistols became smaller they became easier to hide and disguise and were built into purses, cigarette cases, cigarettes and cigars, wallets and even pocket watches. One of the best known of the disguised revolvers is the Frankenau Purse Revolver, also known as the “Combination Pocket Book & Revolver” or the “Revolver Purse.” (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Frankenau Purse Revolver. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.

This disguised purse gun was invented by Oscar Frankenau of Nurnberg, Germany.¹ Frankenau appears to be a man who wanted to cover his bets and protect his invention to the maximum extent possible, so he filed patents in a number of firearms producing countries. In what appears to be a well-planned maneuver he applied for and was granted patents in a number of countries at around the same time. The countries are: Germany, (German Patent 225 dated September 2, 1877), the United Kingdom (British Patent 3375 dated Sept. 5, 1877), the United States (US Patent 196,794 dated November 6, 1877), French Patent 120223 dated September 6, 1877), and Belgium (Belgian patent number 42,982 dated September 15, 1877). It is possible that Frankenau also patented his “purse revolver” in other countries.

Outwardly the Frankenau Purse Revolver is a small, common leather covered purse. But looks can be deceiving. While one side opens to show a coin and bill purse, the other side opens to reveal a small nickered-plated, open-frame revolver that was specifically designed to fit into the purse’s narrow space and made as an integral part of the purse. This side is normally opened only for loading, unloading and cleaning the built-in pistol. The purse’s frame and sides are made of sheet metal or nickel-plated brass. The metal sides are covered by leather. The center frame divides the purse into its two sections when it is opened.

Although the American, British, Belgian, French and German patent drawings, which all appear to be the same, show the hidden pistol to be a pepperbox (Figure 2), the actual production gun is a small, open-frame, double action, pinfire revolver that fires 5 mm

pinfire cartridges. Like many inventions, the actual production model differs from the patent drawings. Upon close examination, the barrel itself does not appear to be a conventional rifled pistol barrel. Plus, the barrel’s bore is slightly larger than the 5 mm caliber of the ammunition. Apparently, the muzzle blast from the pepperbox caused damage to the interior of the case which could also pose a danger to the user. The addition of a short barrel was presumably found to alleviate that problem.² The barrel is actually a tube with no clearance between the barrel and the cylinder on one end and between the barrel and the frame at the muzzle end. This tube would serve to channel powder gas out of the enclosed compartment. The tight tolerances and minimized gaps at the barrel’s cylinder and muzzle end would minimize gas leakage into the compartment while the bore was made oversized to possibly prevent pressure buildup.³ For example, the bore of the barrel of the Frankenau Purse Revolver in the Thurston Collection at the NRA National Firearms Museum is smoothbore and measures 5.94 mm diameter. In addition, the metal outer lid of the gun compartment is perforated with small holes or vents presumably to dissipate heat or to let any residual gas escape. The barrel length is described as being between ½ inch and 1 inch long (Figure 3). The length of the barrel of the gun in the NRA National Firearms Museum is .69 inch. The cylinders held either five or six cartridges.⁴

The center frame divides the purse into two sections when it is opened. The main section holds the small nickered-plated, open-frame revolver and is opened only for loading, unloading and cleaning the built-in pistol. The revolver has a simple self-cocking action and is permanently mounted in its compartment. A loading

Figure 2. US Patent drawing showing that the original design of the Frankenau Purse Revolver was for a pepperbox revolver with no barrel. From US Patent 196,794 dated November 6, 1877.

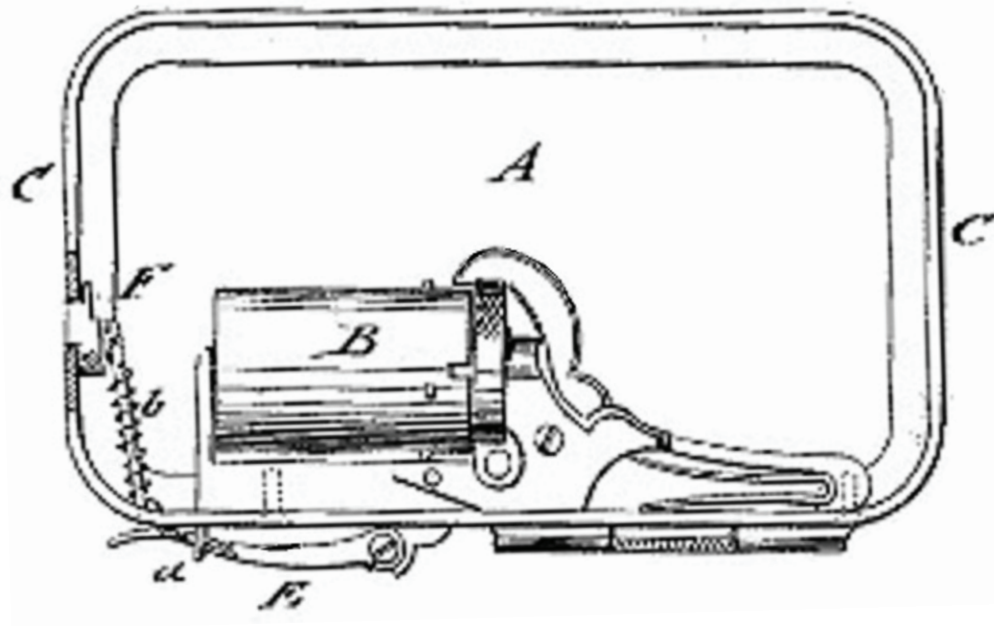


Figure 3. Frankenau Purse Revolver with gun compartment open showing the 5mm pinfire revolver. Note that the hinged firing port over the gun muzzle is open. Note the empty ejector rod holder. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.





Figure 4. Frankenau Purse Revolver with gun compartment open showing the 5 mm pinfire revolver from a different angle. Note the separate rod ejector in its holder and the loading gate behind the cylinder. Photo courtesy of ADER, Maison de Ventes (Auction House). Paris, France.

gate on the left side of the gun at the rear of the cylinder facilitates loading the revolver and ejecting fired cartridges. The loading gate is held closed by a catch. (Figures 3, 4 and 7). A bracket for holding a separate rod ejector is permanently attached to the inside of the gun compartment's cover. This rod ejector is basically a sturdy pin with a knob for gripping and is often missing in surviving purse revolvers (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Ejector rod from a Frankenau Purse Revolver. The gun/purse is part of the Doc J. Thurston collection in the NRA Museum. Photo by author.

The pistol is fired with the gun compartment closed. The idea was that when a person was accosted by footpads, muggers, or other scoundrels of evil intent, he or she would produce the purse and pretend to fumble with it as if to give the robber money. To fire the gun a well concealed folding trigger, which normally sits flush with the frame, is snapped free and down. At the same time as the folding trigger is lowered an ingenious spring mechanism snaps open a pivoted cover or port to clear the revolver's muzzle. The purse is pointed at the target and the trigger pulled. Five or six

shots (depending on the cylinder's capacity) could be rapidly fired, giving the would-be robber a nasty surprise. Unfortunately, the revolver's 5 mm caliber was not exactly a man stopper and except at point blank range accuracy would be problematic.

Two ways of lowering the trigger and opening the muzzle port to prepare the purse gun for firing have been described or demonstrated. The usual way is to push a button above the muzzle port on the short side of the frame. Normally the muzzle cover/port and the button are closed flush with the frame (Figure 6). The muzzle port and button are hinged so that pushing the button in swings the cap over the muzzle port out opening the port. Pushing the button in also acts upon a spring actuated rod or post that is attached to the inside of the button end of the hinged mechanism, pushing it down and unlatching the trigger. This allows the folding trigger to swing down into firing position (Figure 7).⁵ The purse revolver can also be prepared for firing by unlatching the trigger and pulling it down out of its resting place flush with the frame. This pulls down the spring-loaded rod/post which acts on the hinged button, opening the muzzle port.^{6,7} To close the port, one pushes the trigger up into its groove in the frame so that it rests flush with the frame. The tip of the trigger pushes up the spring-loaded rod/post against the inside of the hinged button/firing port cap closing the port.⁷ Figures 8 and 9 show Frankenau purse revolvers with the trigger unfolded and the muzzle port open.

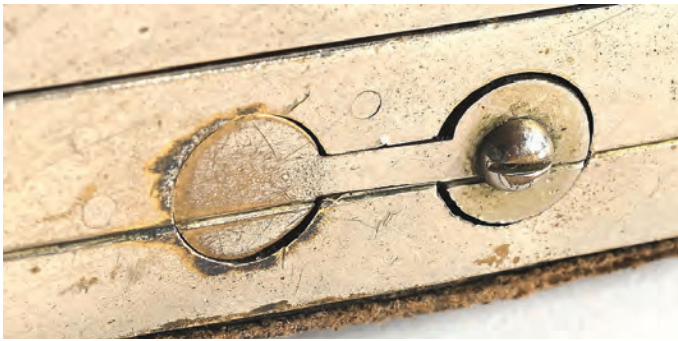


Figure 6. Frankenau Purse Revolver muzzle firing port closed flush with the frame. One pushes on the screw-head button to open the hinged port and lower the trigger to firing position. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.

Island Auction Co. had one on auction in September 2021 with serial number 602 and Cowans's offered one for sale in a November 2015 auction that had serial number 1666. The serial number on the example in the Royal Armouries in Leeds is 299. And Ian McCollum on Forgotten Weapons displayed one with serial number 1085.⁷

Most proof marks are those of Belgium but London and Birmingham, UK proof marks have also been seen.² A common Belgian inspector's mark or proof mark on the frame is a **Crown** over the letter **Z** (Figure 10). A Belgian inspector's mark of a **Crown** over the letter **G** has also been observed.^{3,8} The Royal Armouries in Leeds, United Kingdom has an interesting Frankenau Purse Pistol on display in the Self Defence Gallery that has mixed proof marks. It has a Belgian inspector's mark of a **Crown over Z** on the frame and a London proof mark of a **Crown over GP** and view marks of

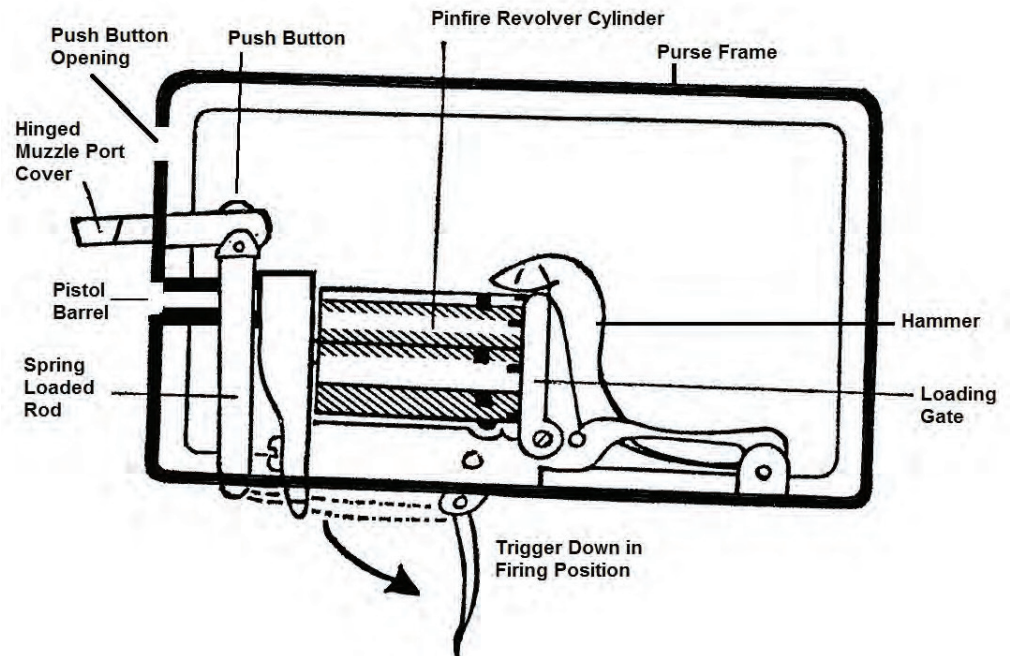


Figure 7. Frankenau Purse Revolver diagram of the pinfire revolver compartment showing the folding trigger down in the firing position and hinged muzzle port open. Note the spring-loaded rod between the hinged muzzle port cover and the tip of the trigger when it is in its closed position. Author's drawing.



Figure 8. Frankenau Purse Revolver showing trigger down and muzzle firing port partially open. The latch for securing the trigger is visible in the slot. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.

a **Crown over V** on the barrel assembly and cylinder.^{9,10} A Frankenau Purse Pistol sold by ADER auction house in Paris, France also appears to have a Belgian inspector's mark of a **Crown over Z** on the frame and London proof and London view marks of **Crown over GP** and **Crown over V** on the cylinder and barrel assembly (Figure 11).¹¹ The fact that it has inspection, proof and view marks from both Belgium and England suggests that the purse revolvers were manufactured in Liege, Belgium with some being exported to England where they would be proofed before sale. The example in the Thurston Collection in the National Firearms Museum has just the Belgian **Crown over the letter Z**, indicating that it was likely sold on the Continent or exported to the United States.

All photos and specimens seen by the author show that the purses are stamped on the long side of the top center frame (the side that opens) "**FRANKENAU'S PATENT**" (Figure 12). The manufacturer's name is not evident. However, this is not unusual with some weapons made by Belgian gun makers.

Besides holding a tiny hidden revolver, the Frankenau Purse Pistol also acts as a genuine purse. When pushed, an oblong button (Figure 12) opens a second section of the purse on the side opposite that of the revolver to reveal an accordion compartmented change purse that can hold coins and/or paper money (Figure 13).



Figure 9. Front end view of a Frankenau Purse Revolver showing trigger down and muzzle firing port open. The end of the revolver's muzzle can be seen inside the open firing port. Photo courtesy of ADER, Maison de Ventes (Auction House). Paris, France.



Figure 10. Belgian **Crown** over **Z** inspector's mark on the rear of the frame of a Frankenau Purse Revolver. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.

Reported dimensions of the closed purse seem to vary slightly among surviving specimens. Variance is between 4 inches and 4.72 inches long x 2.5 inches to 2.75 inches high and 1.25 inches to 1.77 inches wide. The dimensions of the example in the Doc Thurston Collection in the National Firearms Museum are 4.2 inches long x 2.6 inches high x 1.3 inches wide. *Pollard's History of Firearms* gives the dimensions as 4 inches long x 2 inches high x 1.25 inches wide.² Louis Winant in *Firearms Curiosa* gives the dimensions as 4 inches long x 2.5 inches high x 1.25 inches wide.⁶ Cope in his article in *Arms Collecting* magazine gives the measurements as about 4.125 inches long x 2.625 inches high by about 1 inch thick.³ And the one on display at the Royal Armouries has dimensions of 4.25 inches long x 2.75 inches high.⁹ Reported barrel lengths also vary between 0.5 inch and 1 inch. This suggests (along with both Belgian and British proof marks), that the Frankenau purse pistol may have been produced and/or sold by a number of different firms.

The 5 mm pinfire ammunition fired by the Frankenau Purse Revolver was relatively weak by modern standards and by 1877, the year of the Frankenau patents, was rapidly becoming obsolete. Specifications varied from ammunition manufacturer to manufacturer. The typical 5 mm pinfire cartridge (Figure 14) had a powder charge of about 2 grains and a bullet weight of about 18 grains. The cartridge has an overall length of approximately 7.62 millimeters with a diameter of about 5.258 millimeters.^{12,13} As more than one wag joked in a private conversations, it was just big and powerful enough to irritate the attacking criminal.

Figure 11. Frankenau Purse Revolver with London proof and view marks and Belgian inspector's mark. Photo text and lines by author. Photo courtesy of ADER Maison de Ventes (Auction House), Paris, France.

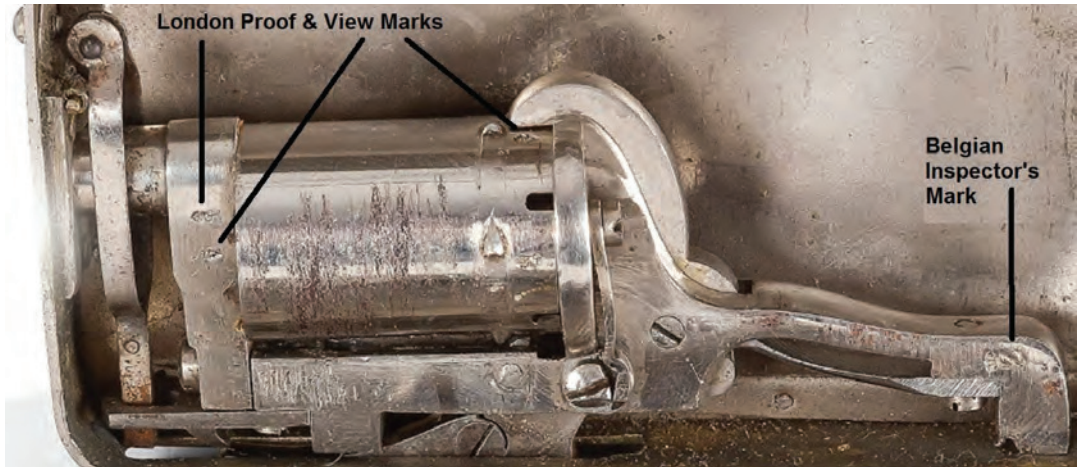


Figure 12. FRANKENAU'S PATENT stamp on frame. The top latch is to open the gun compartment, the bottom button opens the coin purse compartment. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.



Figure 13. Frankenau Purse Revolver opened coin purse.





Figure 14. Two 5mm pinfire cartridges. Photo courtesy of Aaron Newcomer, AaronNewcomer.com.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the Frankenau Purse Revolver is a fascinating example of firearms curiosa that was designed to fill a need for a disguised defensive weapon. Although its effectiveness is questionable, it did appear to enter serial production, unlike other imaginative curiosa which never got past the patent or prototype stage.

In the world of Frankenau Purse Revolver studies, there is still much that isn't known: Who manufactured it? Was there more than one manufacturer? Who sold it? How much did it cost? Are there any examples of it actually being used? Are there any newspaper or magazine advertisements or reports out there? Exactly how many were made? This could be a big long-term research project for such an obscure tiny gun. But I'll leave that to you readers.

Figures 15, 16a, and 16b are Oscar Frankenau's US Patent No. 196,794 for a "Combined Pocket-Book and Revolver." The US patent application was filed September 14, 1877, around the same time as the European patent dates, and the patent granted on November 6, 1877.

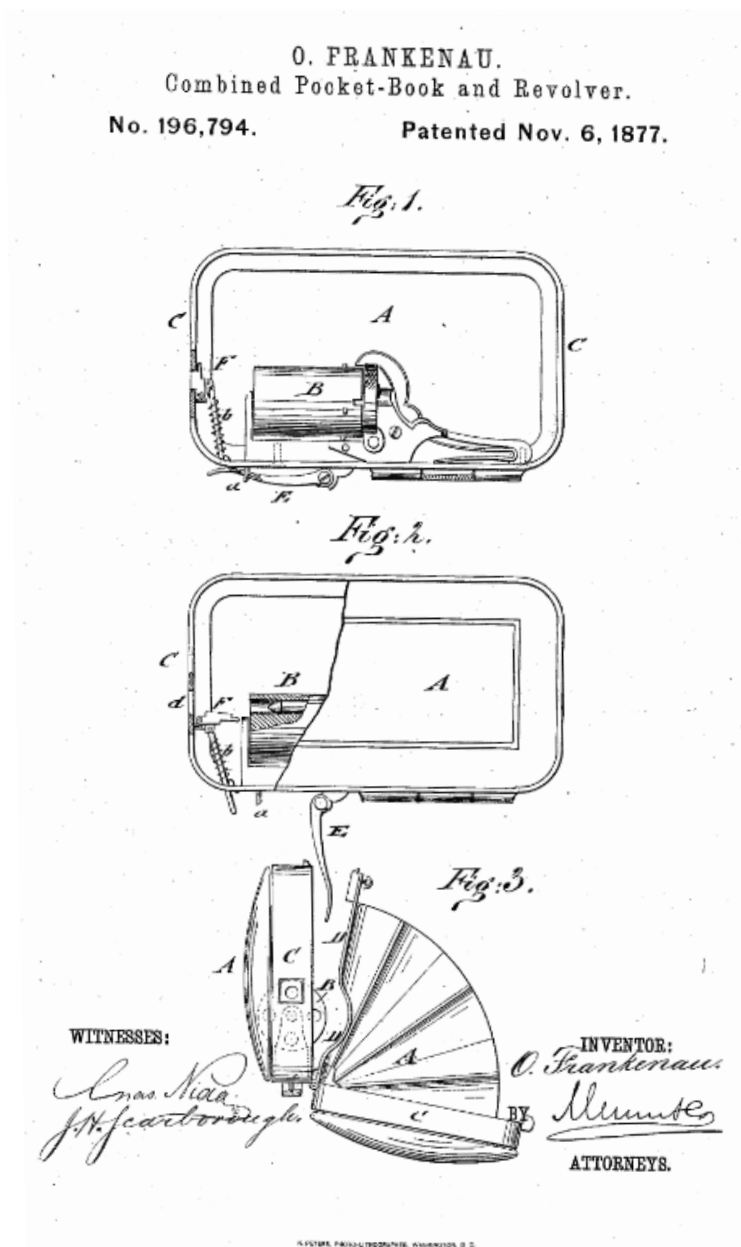


Figure 15. Patent Drawing of Frankenau's US Patent No. 196,794 for a "Combined Pocket-Book and Revolver" dated November 6, 1877. US Patent Office.

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

OSCAR FRANKENAU, OF NÜRNBERG, GERMANY.

IMPROVEMENT IN COMBINED POCKET-BOOK AND REVOLVER.

Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 196,794, dated November 6, 1877; application filed September 14, 1877.

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, OSCAR FRANKENAU, of Nürnberg, Germany, have invented a new and Improved Combination Pocket-Book and Revolver, of which the following is a specification:

In the accompanying drawing, Figure 1 represents a sectional side view of my improved combination pocket-book and revolver, arranged in position to be carried in the pocket. Fig. 2 is a side view of the same, partly in section, showing it ready for firing; and Fig. 3 is an end view of the combination pocket-book and revolver, showing the pocket book or case opened for use.

Similar letters of reference indicate corresponding parts.

This invention relates to a combination, with the frame of a pocket-book, cigar-case, or similar device, to be carried in the pocket, of a revolver, which is arranged at the inside of the frame of the pocket-book or case, so as to be out of sight, but ready for being instantly fired whenever required.

The advantage of such a combination for travelers and others will be readily perceived, as it forms a convenient mode of carrying a revolver for protection, especially when attacked, as the revolver may be fired at the robber when handing the pocket-book.

The invention consists of the combination of a pocket-book frame with a revolver, arranged at the interior and attached to the frame, being separated from the folding pockets or case by a metallic partition.

The trigger is made to swing downward for firing, or up onto the frame, or into a groove flush with the same, being held by a suitable catch.

An opening in the side part of the frame, in line with the barrel to be fired, is closed by a hinged cap, which is opened or closed jointly with the trigger, being set into downward position or locked to the frame.

By reference to the drawing, A represents a pocket-book, cigar-case, or similar article, carried for use in the pocket; and B, a revolver, of suitable size, that is screwed to the frame C of the pocket-book or case. The revolver may be arranged with any suitable number of barrels, as desired.

The pockets or compartments for the money, cigars, &c., are arranged at one side of a hinged partition, D, of sheet metal, which is covered with leather, and intended to separate that part in which the revolver is arranged from the pockets, and also to protect the revolver against pressure.

The partition D is concaved or bulging at that part where the same passes around the cylinder of the revolver, so as to form a kind of casing for it.

The trigger E of the revolver is extended to the outside of the frame C, and hinged so as to be swung up to the frame C, and is retained by a suitable catch, a. In some cases it may be preferable to lodge the trigger, when at rest, in a groove of the frame, so as to be flush with the outer surface of the frame, and preclude thereby any possibility of accidental release and discharge of the revolver while in the pocket.

The trigger E, when thrown up on the frame, comes in contact with a spring-acted post or rod, B, of a cap, E, which is hinged to the inside of the frame, and fitted tightly into an opening, d, of the same, which opening is in line with the barrel to be fired.

The locking of the trigger to the frame produces the simultaneous pushing in of the spring-acted post b, that passes through a guide-hole of the frame to the inside of the same, being hinged to the back of the cap E. The pushing in of the spring-post throws up the cap and closes the exit-opening d. By releasing the trigger and throwing the same in downward position, the post is thrown out by the action of its spring, and thereby the cap opened, so as to clear the barrel, the revolver being then ready for firing, the balls passing unobstructed through the opening in the frame. The simultaneous opening and closing of the exit-aperture for the balls by the release and relocking of the trigger forms an essential feature of the device, which forms a convenient mode of carrying a revolver for protection and self-defense.

Having thus described my invention, I claim as new and desire to secure by Letters Patent—

1. A pocket-book or cigar-case having a revolver or fire-arm inclosed within its frame

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196,794

or fitted thereto in stationary bearings, so as to be fired without removal therefrom, substantially as and for the purpose set forth.

2. A pocket-book having a chamber or receptacle adapted to hold a revolver, and pockets for money or other valuables, as and for the purpose set forth.

3. A pocket-book having a partition provided with an internal concaved or bulging partition adapted to receive a revolver, as and for the purpose set forth.

4. A pocket-book frame having an end-opening located in line with the barrel of a revolver inclosed in said frame, as and for the purpose set forth.

5. A pocket-book frame having a hinged trigger, a suitable catch device for the same, and a revolver attached to the frame of the pocket-book, as and for the purpose set forth.

6. A pocket-book having a frame with an aperture for the passage of the balls, a hinged

cap for closing such aperture, an internally-located revolver, an external trigger, and devices, substantially as shown, for connecting the latter with the cap for opening and closing the aperture in the frame simultaneously with the releasing or locking of the trigger, as and for the purpose set forth.

7. In a combination pocket-book and revolver, the combination of the swinging trigger with the sliding and guided spring-post of the cap, hinged to the inside of the frame and fitted to the ball-aperture of the same, so as to open or close by the releasing or locking of the trigger, substantially as specified.

In testimony that I claim the foregoing I have hereunto set my hand this 16th day of August, 1877.

OSCAR FRANKENAU.

Witnesses:

F. W. GÜLTZORY,

H. SEADLER.

Figure 16a. Page 1 of Frankenau's US Patent No. 196,794 for a "Combined Pocket-Book and Revolver" dated November 6, 1877. United States Patent Office.

Figure 16b. Page 2 of Frankenau's US Patent No. 196,794 for a "Combined Pocket-Book and Revolver" dated November 6, 1877. United States Patent Office.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Ernest Lyles of the staff of the NRA National Firearms Museum for the opportunity to examine the Frankenau Purse Revolver in the museum's Doc Thurston Collection. Also, Matthew Schneiderman, ASAC, for his helpful suggestions.

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United Kingdom Patent 3375 dated Sept. 5, 1877 for Revolver Purse, UK Intellectual Property Office

United States Patent 196,794 dated November 6, 1877 for Improvement in Combined Pocket Book and Revolver, United States Patent Office

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Czerny's International Auction House; *A very rare Frankenau pin-fire pepperbox revolver in a purse – Lot 397*; <https://www.finarte.it/auction/rare-and-fine-antique-arms-armour-and-militaria-sarzana-2022-12-16/a-very-rare-frankenau-pin-fire-pepperbox-revolver-in-a-purse-89648?lang=en>; Rome & Milan, Italy; December 16, 2022

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ENDNOTES

¹ Various sources give different first names or different home city. For example, his name has been variously given as Oliver Frankenau of Frankfurt am Main (Claud Blair in *Pollard's History of Firearms*), Otto Frankenau of Magdeburg (John Walter in *Secret Firearms*), and Oscar Frankenau from Nuremburg (Paul Carella, Bonhams, on *Antiques Roadshow*) or Liege (OSENAT Auction Catalogue). This article will use his name and home city as given on official government documents, specifically his patents. For example, French Patent 120,223 dated September 6, 1877, German Patent 225 dated September 2, 1877 and US Patent 196,794 dated November 6, 1877 give his name and residence as Oscar Frankenau of Nurnberg, Germany.

² Blair, Claud; *Pollard's History of Firearm*; MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1981

³ Cope, Kenneth L. "Frankenau's Purse Revolver". *Arms Collecting*, Volume 25, Pages 27-28, No. 1, February 1987

- ⁴ Different sources, both print and auction house descriptions, describe the revolver as being either five or six shots. Claud Blair in *Pollard's History of Firearms*, Louis Winant in *Firearms Curiosa*, John Walter in *Secret Firearms*, Jack Dunlap in *American, British and Continental Pepperbox Firearms* and at least one auction house, Cowan's, describe it as a six shot pinfire revolver. The Royal Armouries in Leeds, UK, describes the Frankenau Purse Revolver on display there as being five shot. Kenneth Cope in his article in *Arms Collecting* states that it is 5 shot. Also several European auction houses that advertised Frankenau Purse Revolvers (ADER in France, Czerny's in Italy, and Osenat in France) as well as Ian McCollum on *Forgotten Weapons* and Joel Colander of Rock Island Auctions on Brownell's *From the Vault* described the gun being displayed as five shot. The author examined the Frankenau Purse Revolver in the Thurston Collection in the NRA National Firearms Museum and determined that that example has a five shot cylinder. One can surmise that if the guns were produced by different manufacturers, they could be either five or six shot, depending on the manufacturer. On the other hand, it is possible that some of the literature describing the guns is inaccurate.
- ⁵ Colander, Joel and Ford, Keith. Brownell's *From The Vault: Cane Guns, Purse Guns and Other Curios*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qJpPcvXRdI; Oct. 29, 2021
- ⁶ Winant, Lewis. *Firearms Curiosa*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY; 1955
- ⁷ McCollum, Ian; *Forgotten Weapons*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmJKHBXuctw>; Sept. 15, 2016
- ⁸ Osenat Commissaire-Priseur; Jean Louis Noiseiez IV Collection, *Rare Frankenau's Revolver Purse – Lot 78*; <https://www.osenat.com/en/lot/148104/24349014?>; Fontainebleau and Paris, France
- ⁹ Royal Armouries. *Pinfire five-shot purse revolver - Frankenau Patent Purse Model - about 1878*. <https://royalarmouries.org/collection/object/object-18978>
- ¹⁰ Ferguson, Jonathan; Keeper of Firearms and Artillery Royal Armouries, Leeds, UK; E-Mails July 17, 2025 and July 21, 2025
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- ¹² Newcomer, Aaron; *Eley Bros Factory Drawings for Pinfire Cartridges*; <https://aaronnewcomer.com/eley-bros-factory-drawings-for-pinfire-cartridges/>; October 4, 2020
- ¹³ Newcomer, Aaron; *Pinfire Cartridges from the White & Munhall Laboratory Reference Collection*; <https://aaronnewcomer.com/pinfire-cartridges-from-the-white-munhall-laboratory-reference-collection/>; October 12, 2020

