

**THE  
NEW GUNS  
OF THE  
OLD WEST**

Story by Philip Schreier  
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Reproduction Colt Walker  
.44-cal. percussion revolver.

Navy Arms Reproduction  
LeMat percussion  
revolver.

Colt Single Action Army revolver

Reproduction  
Colt .31-cal.  
percussion revolver.

**T**he sport of cowboy action shooting is steeped in the history and lore of the old west. It was out of love and fondness for this bye-gone era of cowboys and outlaws that prompted the founders of the sport to organize and create a hobby that today numbers more than 30,000 active members in less than 10 years since its beginning.

Today, the reproduction firearms market is alive and well with the re-issue of some classic arms. There has also been an introduction of a group of some curious and lesser known wheel guns that are finding favor with those who want something just a little bit different from everyone else on the firing line. Here are some of the more interesting sixguns of the old west that are making a big splash in the Cowboy Action Shooting circuit.

### The Black Powder Cap 'n Ball Revolver

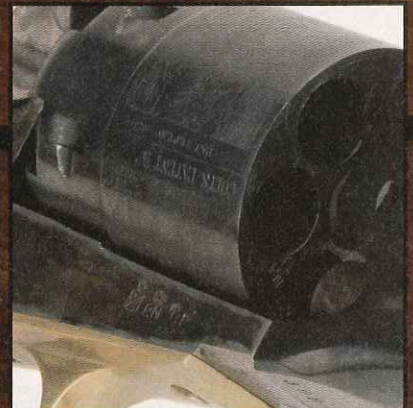
The centennial of the American Civil War provided the opportunity for thousands of Civil War buffs to take to the fields and re-enact famous battles from our nation's most divisive period of history. Prior to the centennial, Val Forgett of Navy Arms began to produce copies of the famous Colt and Remington revolvers in Italy, and to this day, he has brought hundreds of thousands of detailed and precise reproductions to the hands of re-enactors and skirmishers.

The current cowboy action shooting events allow for competition using the old Civil War period guns in their matches. Today's shooter has a host of fine reproductions to choose from and numerous styles from a variety of manufacturers.

The Colt Blackpowder Signature series licensed by Colt is produced by Anthony Imperato in Brooklyn, New York. This exquisitely crafted series of authentic Colt firearms has recently offered the shooter options for embellishment that rival the finest work done by the likes of Nimschke and Tiffany. If you are looking for something that stands out from the typical over-the-counter revolver, this is the place to start looking.

With the boom in action shooting and thousands of prospective buyers, manufacturers have expanded the selection of typical guns. Recently non-Colts have become attractive due to their uniqueness. The LeMat, a nine shot .44 with a bit of umph in the form of a 20-ga. shotgun barrel as well as the Starr single- and double-action revolvers, both offered by Navy Arms, provide the discerning shootist with something that stands out in the crowd.

Some reproduction percussion revolvers present ample evidence of their foreign heritage with Italian proofmarks stamped on frames and barrels.

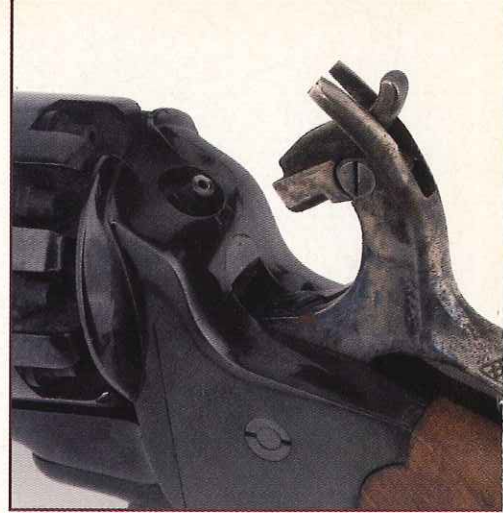


## The Conversions:

For a long time, those with a desire to shoot post-Civil War revolvers had only limited and expensive outlets. Second and third generation Colt Peacemakers and eventually reproductions of the Peacemaker were only guns available. Yet historically, there was a great demand for cartridge firing revolvers in the eight years between the end of the Civil War and the introduction of the Peacemaker in 1873. Answering that demand in the late 1860s were a number of factory and non-factory conversions of Civil War cap 'n ball revolvers. Today a number

of manufacturers are producing economical conversions of the old cap 'n balls that will surely turn a few heads at the next shoot.

**R&D's Remington 1858 New Model Army "Drop-in unit":** Remington's old trade slogan "First in the Field" is a valid one when talking about conversions of old cap 'n ball revolvers in a historic sense. Some of the earliest work in conversions was done on Remington-Rider and New Model Pocket revolvers. Ken Howell of R&D Guns in Beloit, Wisconsin, has produced a conversion drop in unit that quickly became a favorite of mine during the



The original selective fire: The hammer on this LeMat revolver can be repositioned to contact a central percussion cone, firing the smooth-bore tube located beneath the main barrel.



Above, modern conversion replicas allow today's collector/shooters to acquire metallic cartridge counterparts to their classic percussion guns. Below, the Colt Blackpowder Signature Series includes deluxe percussion revolvers available with silver and gold plating, period engraving and "Tiffany" grip plates or buffalo horn stocks.



test firing. R&D's product is a two-piece cylinder with a back plate that has six floating firing pins. Originally based on two British patents by Adams and Tranter of the 1860s, this unit allows any of you with an existing 1858 New Model cap 'n ball revolver to simply swap out the old percussion cylinder with this six shot .45 Colt cylinder. Little or no hand fitting is required to your old cap 'n ball for this unit to function. Ken sent me a beautifully finished Uberti reproduction with the new cylinder already fitted and ready to shoot—and boy did it shoot! Straight out of the box it was shooting cloverleaves on bullseye at 25'. Although the mechanics of rolling the cylinder in and out of the frame every time you reload can at times be a bit frustrating, the beauty and accuracy of this revolver leaves little else to be desired. Because the conversion cylinder is considered by BATF to be a mechanical part and installing that part in a percussion revolver by an individual is legal, this unit needs no FFL or form 4473 to change hands. Ken insists that this unit only be used in steel frame revolvers as Brass frame replicas are not only historically inaccurate but cannot handle the higher pressures of the .45 Colt load. He also suggests that only .45 Colt ammo rated as "Cowboy Loads" be used in his guns.

**The Colt Conversions:** When the War Between the States ended in 1865, Smith & Wesson was the only American firearms manufacturing firm producing revolvers that accepted metallic cartridges due to their licensing arrangement on Rollin White's bored-through cylinder patent. Colt could not produce a revolver cylinder that accepted metallic cartridges from the back of the cylinder, so F. Alexander Thuer, of Colt, patented a cartridge-firing conversion that accepted cartridges from the front.

This required a special rimless cartridge and was eventually dropped for the designs of Charles B. Richards and William Mason once the Rollin White patent expired in 1869. Tens of thousands of percussion 1851, 1860 and 1861 Colt revolvers were converted, both by the factory and blacksmiths, for use by those who needed the gun and the more practical metallic cartridge.

**Cimarron's Converted 1851 Navy & 1860 Army Revolvers:** Mike Harvey of Cimarron F.A. Co. in Fredericksburg, Texas, supplied two exquisite Colt first model Richards conversions for evaluation. These guns are not like some of the John Gren and R&D Guns conversions that were made from originals, second generations or black-powder reproductions (true conversions) these guns are made new from whole cloth by American Western Arms in Italy and accept old and modern smokeless cartridges. The 1851 Navy was originally manufactured by Colt in .36 caliber from 1851-1873. The Cimarron Richards '51 Navy model is chambered in .38 Special allowing the sport and competition shooter great latitude in available ammo. As I would hold off in putting any +P ammo in an open top revolver, I found that Black Hills 148 gr. wadcutter in .38 Spl. was a great load and was easy to handle in what some would consider a small frame revolver. The 1860 Army has always been my favorite percussion revolver and Cimarron's Richards model in .44 Colt was a delight. All the positive attributes of a beautifully styled revolver with the ease of cartridge loading. My old John Gren 1860 conversion has sat around the house for years, unused but admired because I don't reload .44 Colt. Black Hills has come to the rescue once again by manufacturing .44 Colt (as well as .38 Colt, .44 Russian and .45 Schofield) so those of us that are reloading challenged can obtain great ammo at an affordable price. Out of the box, these two revolvers had the smoothest action of any that I tested. Shooting a Richards or Richards-Mason conversion is a trick because of the poor sight acquisition that is inherent with the revolver and both guns tended to shoot high (but centered) at 25'. That's not a bad thing considering the original military specs was for point of aim at 75 yds.! There is an 1861 Navy available as well. All three models are available in .38 Colt, .38 Spl. and .44 Colt.

**Traditions Colt 1851 Navy Richards:** Traditions of Old Saybrook, Connecticut also produces an 1851 Navy Richards conversion in .38 Spl. As with the Cimarron '51, this gun is manufactured by Armi San Marco in Italy but finished and fitted here in the states. It



Popular in cowboy action events, metallic cartridge single action revolvers are readily found with blue/case-hardened and nickel finishes.

is nice to handle this gun and not have numerous Italian proof marks visible at every flat surface of the gun. The case hardening, the luster of the blued barrel and the cylinder as well as the fit of the stocks will make this gun a handsome addition to your wheel-gun inventory.

**The R&D Guns Colt 1861 Navy Richards-Mason:** Ken Howell probably knows more about converted six-guns than anyone since C. B. Richards. He has spent the last 30 years restoring and tinkering with the originals and in the last 10 years has produced some of the finest conversions that I have ever seen. He makes some of the most historically accurate Colts since the originals. The 1861 Navy that I tested in .38 Colt was a real treat to shoot and handle. Because Ken's guns are made one by one and not turned out by the tray rack, there is that extra attention to detail and accuracy that might be lost on some manufacturers. This '61 Navy has a front blade sight that is dovetailed to the barrel so that it can be drifted back and forth, just like some of the converted originals. He does all his own case-hardening and stamping, so you will find only finishes and marks that were original to these guns a century ago. In addition to the previously mentioned 1858 Remington and 1861 Navy, R&D also produces copies of the 1860 Army in both Richards and Richards-Mason conversions as well as the Colt 1872 Open-Top revolver in .38 Colt or .44 Colt.

#### The Single Actions:

For those of you who want a classic Colt Single Action, there are a number of avenues to choose from.

Nothing beats the real thing of course and if you want a Colt and can afford the \$900 price tag on a new third-generation SAA, you would be making a sound investment. Recently Colt announced the introduction of the Colt Cowboy .45 SAA (or Model P to the purists out there). This revolver is the standard SAA of old with a few new twists. The gun is produced through the investment casting process (Pioneered by Val Forgett and in current use by Sturm, Ruger & Co.) and has a transfer-bar safety. Available initially in .45 Colt and only with a 5" barrel, this revolver is considerably cheaper than the standard third-generation from the Colt Custom Shop.

Now just between you and me dear reader, there is something I find disquieting about the transfer-bar safety. When

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A Remington Model 1858 conversion cylinder from R&D features a black plate fitted with six individual firing pins.



Continued from page 17

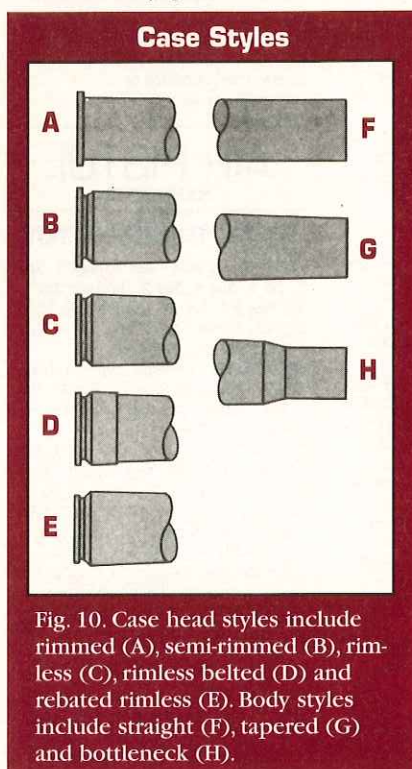


Fig. 10. Case head styles include rimmed (A), semi-rimmed (B), rimless (C), rimless belted (D) and rebated rimless (E). Body styles include straight (F), tapered (G) and bottleneck (H).

and electronic scales are available. When faster reloading is desired than can be achieved through weighing each charge, you can use a powder measure—a device for metering a precise amount of powder into a case with the turn of a crank. The weight of the powder charge as dispensed must be verified with a reloading scale.

For safety and proper performance, cases and finished cartridges must be held to certain precise dimensions; this requires an accurate dial caliper capable of measuring to .001". Dial calipers can also be used to verify other critical component dimensions, such as bullet diameters.

While some presses have a mechanism for seating a fresh primer in the case, others do not and a separate priming tool must be used. Also, cases lengthen slightly each time they are fired and must eventually be trimmed back to a standard dimension using a case trimmer.

Other useful tools include a deburring tool to deburr and chamfer the case mouth for easier bullet insertion; a primer pocket cleaner to eliminate powder residue, grit, etc. from the primer pocket; case cleaning machines to remove residue and dirt from the spent cases; a powder funnel to guide powder into the case mouth and case loading blocks to organize the cases in batches.

Additionally, the reloader must have a selection of recent reloading manuals to cross-check and compare load data, a clean workbench or table where reloading can be done in a safe and organized manner and eye protection that must be worn at all times while reloading.

### Reloading Manuals and Other Sources of Information

Most of the major manufacturers of reloading components publish reloading manuals. In addition to information on reloading tools and technique, these books contain load data, which can be viewed as recipes for specific loads. The load data for a specific cartridge will tell you exactly the brand of case and primer, the brand and weight of powder as well as the brand, weight and type of bullet that can all be safely combined to make a cartridge. These data are developed in professional ballistics laboratories and are pressure-tested for safety and uniformity.

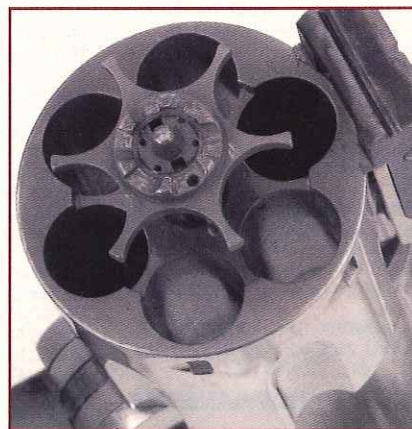
Additionally, information on loads, equipment and techniques can be found in many books as well as in articles in magazines such as *Shooting Sports USA*, *American Rifleman* and many others. Get your loader and materials ready because next month, we'll explore in detail the sequence of steps involved in loading a rifle cartridge and in testing a load for accuracy. For more information on reloading and on the NRA Basic Metallic Cartridge Reloading Course, call (703) 267-1423. ©

### Safe Reloading Practices

- **Always** wear eye protection whenever working with reloading components.
- **Always** follow exactly the reloading data published by the manufacturers of reloading components.
- **Never** exceed the maximum load in a reloading manual.
- **Only** use reloading components that are clearly and unmistakably identified. Don't use powders or other components that are in hand-labeled containers.
- **Never** use drugs or alcohol prior to or while reloading.
- **Never** eat at or around the reloading bench or while handling lead.
- **Never** smoke while reloading or in the proximity of powder or primers.
- **Thoroughly** wash your hands and face after reloading or handling cartridge components.

Continued from page 27

you cock the action on an original Colt Richards-Mason or SAA, there is just something about that hammer and firing pin that conjures up the very masculine image of a saber tooth tiger or the tusks on a wild boar. I know that the transfer bar safety is just that—a safety device. This brings me to the point of re-affirming in your collective conscience that if you do have an old SAA or a reproduction of one, only load five rounds in the cylinder. *Let the hammer rest on the empty chamber.* Follow this simple rule and you may well make it to the other side with the same ten toes that God gave you to start with.



As with originals, reproduction Schofield revolvers provide excellent extraction of cartridge cases from the cylinder, making possible rapid reloads for the cowboy action shootist.

Val Forgett of Navy Arms was the first to introduce re-production firearms in the late 1950s with his line of Civil War revolvers. He eventually carried reproductions of cartridge revolvers and today handles a full line of Colt and Remington models. In 1996 he was again "the first with the finest" when his two year joint project with Uberti resulted in the re-introduction of the Smith & Wesson Schofield revolver.

Whether you have joined the sport of cowboy action shooting or you just like to shoot or collect historic guns, the period between 1865 and 1900 was the period of this country's greatest growth and expansion. Some would argue that the revolver reached the pinnacle of perfection during that time period and as I shoot some of these reproductions and evaluate them against some of my "modern" guns, I tend to agree. ©

**Safe shooting and happy trails...**