



## LEVERGUNS

### AN AMERICAN TRADITION

by Paco

Absolutely pure American. The leveraction rifle and carbine is an American design, American built, and loved world wide.

When I wrote my book on the Leveraction rifle back in 1983/84, published in 85, I tried to get a short and to the point history of its start and its development before I went into its use. Because space was so restricted, both the history and the number of calibers covered were kept to a minimum. I am filling in a little with some of what I couldn't back then.

The history of the leveraction rifle is fascinating. It started when muzzle loading was still the way of the day and the levergun's history begins, believe it or not, not as a rifle but as a handgun! There are very few things today that can be said to be pure American in concept, in manufacture, and in use as is the leveraction rifle. I make no distinction between the carbine and the rifle unless we are going into the technical side. The history of the leveraction is shrouded in folklore and stories that are dubious at best. The gun press is not immune to the old sin of reporting "the other fellows work without checking the facts." So the same stories about the levergun's development get told over and over until they somehow become truth - accepted fact. The facts of the following have been checked as closely as old records will allow.

During the 1830s there was a leveraction single shot black powder rifle brought out that actually worked. The Ferguson rifle had an under lever that was dropped, which opened the breach. A ball was then dropped into the bore and the powder poured in after it. Then the lever was drawn closed, locking it back up again, giving better accuracy, less fouling, and quicker reloading over the muzzle loaders. The problem seems to have been the ability in those days to manufacture the breach and the backplate so they fully sealed together on closing properly. They had multishot rifles designed like revolvers after Sam Colt's designs opened the way, but they had problems also.

In 1848 Walter Hunt gained a patent for a self-contained cartridge called a rocket-ball. It was a solid powder charge attached to the base of the bullet, with no cartridge case. Lewis Jennings, a friend of Hunt's, designed a near leveraction but in a handgun form, though a few rifles were also produced for the new rocket-ball cartridge. And this first design was called the "VOLITION Repeater." Jennings and Hunt got financing through a man named Palmer, who convinced a gun manufacturing firm, Robbins and Lawrence, to make up the initial guns - handguns.

Then enters the most important person in all of the development of a workable leveraction rifle. A man named Tyler Henry was working for Robbins and Lawrence. Horace Smith, one half of the soon to be famous Smith and Wesson team, became financially involved also. By 1852/53 the venture was deemed a financial failure, because the Volition was overly complicated and very under powered. So Smith got a friend of his, Daniel Wesson, the other half of the soon to be S&W, interested in the design. They formed a partnership in 1854 to produce "Rocket-Ball" guns. Wesson at that time was already a gun designer and arms maker of some importance. Palmer stayed with them and a small number of pistols were produced for sale.

A financial reformation of the company in 1855 brought about the sale of stock to a limited number of stock holders. Among them was a shirt manufacturer by the name of Oliver Winchester. At this point the

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developed the .22 rimfire (the first was the short known as a BB Cap, Bulleted Breach rimfire). But they left the Volcanic Company with this development and started their own empire.

In the deal that was made between Winchester and Smith and Wesson at their leaving, S&W got the Rolland White patents to a bored thru cylinder for handguns and Winchester got the patents to the leveraction designs. There is a story I couldn't find hard fact on that Winchester and Smith and Wesson, on a hand shake, agreed that S&W would never make rifles and Winchester would never manufacture handguns. True or not, the agreement lasted for decades. And at this point, Winchester becomes the power in the Volcanic Company.

Tyler Henry becomes the manufacturing supervisor and foreman as well as chief designer. The company went to brass for the action/gun frames and to rifles not handguns. And in 1856, the real first production leveraction repeating rifle was produced by the Volcanic Arms Company. Thus began the production of leveraction rifles almost as we know them today. This was long before the Civil War, which doesn't speak well for the Generals in that conflict because, as we will see, the semi-autoloading rifle of the times was available - at a time when muzzle loaders were the military arms used. A rifle that could have revolutionized warfare, and cut years off the Civil War, was hardly recognized by the Generals.

From 1856 to today, we have 143 years of development of the leveraction rifle. It has been constantly designed and redesigned, new calibers and cartridges, and a multitude of companies jumping on the manufacturing band wagon. But only a few really contributed to it's advancement. The great Tyler Henry must have seen Smith and Wesson's new cartridge for their handgun, the .22 rimfire (short), because Henry developed a .44 caliber rimfire that looks like an upscaled 22 short. And the Volcanic rifle was chambered for this new copper cased .44 caliber round. And that brought about the rifle's acceptance to the public. With this round, the power of the rifle jumped way beyond the old caseless ammo's potential to around the power of a modern day 158 grain .38 special out of a six inch revolver, or around 350 lbs of muzzle energy. And in 1860, just in time for the hostilities between the states, the next rifle was brought out. It was called the Henry after its designer, or should we call him the re-designer. Whatever, it was a brilliant rifle and cartridge, holding 13 to 14 rounds, at a time when the world was still ramming balls down muzzles.

At this time a nineteen year-old boy is working with an invention of his own, totally different from the Winchester designs. Christopher M. Spencer was walking the halls of the War Department trying to get the Generals interested in his repeating rifle design. They were not listening. In one of those historical anomalies that occur not nearly enough, several characters come together here. Young Chris pours his heart out to the doorman of the War Department as he is leaving in despair. The door man looks over the boy's rifle, is taken by it's importance, and tells the lad to come back later that day when he is off from work. He, the door man, has a friend that will look at it. A friend of some importance.

We don't know how the President of the United States knew the lowly door man of the War Department, but Abe Lincoln was a man of the people and this is one example that proves that old saying. This, of course, led to the historic meeting between Lincoln and Spencer on the lawn of the White House and Lincoln firing the Spencer rifle, which resulted in the War Department finally purchasing on December 31, 1861, 7500 Spencer rifles for the Navy. But the rifles got issued to the Michigan Cavalry Brigade. A French Colonel by the name of LeCompte wrote that the Spencer rifle was one of the most important results of the American conflict, but the Generals on both sides of the Atlantic didn't listen.

Between October of 1863 and August of 1865, the War department spent nearly \$3,000,000 dollars on the Spencer and had a total of nearly 70,000 units delivered. At the same time, Winchester couldn't get the attention of anyone in the War Department. Only about 1800 Henrys were purchased, though almost

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Boston shut down, the principles thinking it would never be used enough by civilians to keep manufacturing going. So Oliver Winchester stepped in and purchased everything - patents, and all remaining stocks of guns and parts which he sold over the years to an eager populace. He didn't go into manufacturing the Spencer, just eliminating his competition.

Spencer got his patent on March 6, 1860 (#27393) and Tyler Henry got his for the Henry Rifle on October 16, 1860 (#30446). But the War between the States would be over and the leveraction rifle would grow in sales to the hungry civilian market, not a military market. Its incredible use in warfare was lost until 1877. That was the year the Generals of the world realized their stupidity. And several great ones were to learn the cost of arrogance. But up until then, the development of the leveraction continued with the 1866 Winchester and the great 1873 Winchester. The 1866 incorporated a loading port in the frame and a wood forearm. The 1873 made the biggest jump with center-fire ammo and powerful cartridges, with the .44-40 and the .38-40. The .32-20 didn't come along until 1882.

### [Plevna and the changing face of warfare!](#)

Probably the only time leveraction rifles were used in a military action en mass was at Plevna Turkey in July of 1877. The Russian Army, which was one of the strongest and most formidable of the world at the time, was massed around Plevna. The world knew it was just a matter of time and the city would fall to the overwhelming force of 100,000 Russian Forces against only 20,000 Turks. The Russians were armed with breech-loading single shot rifles of Brerdan and Krnka manufacture. General Krudener of the Russian Forces was confident. The Russian intelligence had told him the Turks' cavalry had 30,000 Winchester 1866 Henry Rifles. What they didn't know was the Cavalry was disbanded and the troops now surrounded by the Russians had the Henry repeaters and people to support them by reloading for them. They also had 100 rounds of ammo on them and another 500 rounds at their feet for each man. The Russian Generals dismissed the fact of the repeaters as unimportant.

The first wave of 10,000 Russian Guardsmen hit the trench lines of the Turks on July 30th and almost 6,000 of them fell in the first hour. The Winchesters cut them to ribbons, men and horses slaughtered. But the Russians couldn't grasp the fact that so small a force could stop the mighty Russian war machine. They continually attacked until early September 1877 when their final losses topped thirty thousand men. The Russians withdrew. Every European nation learned a lesson, not just Russia. The Turks bought 140,000 more 1873 Winchesters and the rest of Europe scrambled for repeaters - but they went with bolt actions.

Leveractions, except for their limited use in the Civil War, Plevna and a few other limited military actions, never really were a military rifle. The only other government to buy a large number of leveractions were the Russians themselves. The Winchester 1895 rifle was purchased by Russia. In fact, nearly three quarters of all 95s manufactured went to Russia. Chambered in 7.62 Russian Rimmed with a 148 grain bullet at 2800 fps. Almost 300,000 1895 leveraction Winchesters were sold to Russia in 1914 and 1915, over 296,000 of them delivered before 1916 and the First World War. I have a copy of a photo of the Russians on the front lines armed with 95s. The U.S. had ordered only 10,000 of them for the Spanish American War chambered in 30-40 Krag. Again, individuals bought their own. Bucky O' Neil, the famous Sheriff of Northern Arizona, carried one in that war.

By the way, the 95s in the Russian hands survived for a long time. It was reported often that they were used also in the Second World War against the Germans when they invaded Russia during the 1940s.

Many companies brought out leveractions. Savage and Evans had rotary magazines, Marlins had solid actions with angle ejection, strong enough to chamber the .45-70 round 6 to 7 years before Winchester

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Leveraction rifles have always sold two to three times as many over bolt actions. Even today they are a hot item. And they have been upgraded to the power levels of bolt action rifles in some designs.

The 45 and 50 Alaskans on the Winchester model 71 action (modern 1886 design) are two of the most powerful cartridges in existence today. Pistol calibers, revolver calibers, leveraction calibers and even bolt action rifle calibers, the leveraction rifle is chambered for them all. If you can't find one you like, one that will do the job, one that will fit you well, you're much too picky.

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