

THE GUN THAT WON THE WEST



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Oliver Fisher Winchester was a prosperous American clothing manufacturer turned financier who had no practical knowledge of firearms or their manufacture. His understanding of corporate organisation and finance, however, was excellent. Under his guidance one of the world's finest rifles was developed and a renowned rifle manufacturing company, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company (USA), established.



Oliver F. Winchester, the founder of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. (Photo: blog.winchester.com)

Winchester's interest in gun making came gradually. In 1855 he purchased some stock in the Volcanic Repeating Arms Company. But the Volcanic rifle was not a commercial success, and in 1857 the company went bankrupt. Winchester, though, was convinced that the Volcanic design was capable of improvement, and so purchased the entire stock and all assets. He promptly organised a new stock company called the New Haven Arms Company and hired Tyler Henry to re-design the Volcanic rifle. By 1860 Henry was able to resolve some of the bugs in the Volcanic design and, using the newly introduced .44 rimfire cartridge, he modified the rifle mechanism. The result

was the famous lever-action Henry rifle, as well as financial success for the company. In 1866 Winchester re-organised the company once more and re-named it the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Thereafter all arms manufactured by the company were known as Winchesters.

The first of the new Winchester rifles was the Model 1866. It used much the same mechanism as the Henry rifle, but with some improvements by Nelson King. Most notable of these was a gate which allowed the cartridges to be slipped into the magazine from the breech instead of from the front end, and permitted a completely closed tube. In fact, it was this loading gate that distinguished the Model 1866 from the Henry rifle. Also, the new wooden forestock covered nearly half of the magazine tube externally, and so served to protect the shooter from a hot barrel, a feature the Henry rifle lacked.

The Winchester Model 1866, dubbed the 'Yellow Boy' for its bright brass receiver, proved an immediate success for Winchester, with some 170 000 manufactured between 1866 and 1898. With its 15-shot tubular magazine it was considered more as a fighting weapon than a hunting rifle, and Winchester even offered a bayoneted military musket version. The large majority, however, were made in carbine configuration (a shortened model suitable for use on horseback) and a significant number were shipped to the American Wild West. To the Native Americans, who purchased and used them, these rifles became known as 'the many shots' guns.

In 1873 the Winchester Model 1873 followed, introducing center-fire ammunition in the Winchester rifle for the first time. When the Colt Patent Arms Manufacturing Company introduced their Single Action Army revolver in the same Winchester chambering as the Model 1873, a lifelong partnership was formed between these two companies with Colt producing single-action revolvers in each of the Winchester's chamberings within a few years of each round's inception. In reality this meant that a man need only stock a single type of ammunition to power his many different guns – be they rifles or revolvers.

Over a half million Model 1873 rifles had been produced by 1900, making it Winchester's most popular rifle. It was certainly one of the most recognisable rifles of America's frontier period, with the likes of Butch Cassidy and Billy the Kid preferring it to any other rifle. It's no wonder, therefore, that it gained a reputation as "The Gun that Won the West."

Included in the National Museum's firearm collection are five Winchester rifles: a Model 1866 with brass framed receiver; a Model 1873; two Model 1876's and a Model 1886. The Winchester Model 1876, or 'Centennial Model' due to it appearing in time for America's 100-year birthday celebration, was a heavier-framed rifle than the Models 1866 and 1873, chambered for full-powered cartridges suitable for big-game hunting rather than the handgun-size rounds of its predecessors. The Model 1876 toggle-link action receiver was, however, too short to handle the popular big-game cartridges of the day, and production ceased in 1897. The Winchester Model 1886 was designed with an all-new and considerably stronger locking block action that proved capable of handling the huge buffalo cartridges.



But how did these all-American rifles end up in South Africa? According to one source, most of the Winchester rifles were brought in by American miners and fortune-seekers heading for the Northern Cape diamond fields (1860s) and the Witwatersrand gold reefs (1886). It is understandable, for in those days the gold rushes were a 'Wild West' in their own right, and a 16-shot (15 + 1) lever-action carbine made a handy and effective defensive weapon. The story goes that, before returning home, some Americans sold their Winchesters to South African locals.



What is a repeating rifle?
Ever since man began to use firearms he has attempted to produce guns that could fire successive shots as rapidly as possible. In the beginning, with the slow match as a means of ignition, the simplest repeating system was an increase in the number of barrels. Then, in 1849, Walter Hunt patented a gun with a tubular magazine containing a coiled spring to force the bullet towards the chamber. He placed the magazine under the barrel and named it 'Volitional Repeater'. This was the basic design for what was to develop into the Winchester repeating magazine action. To load, the shooter inserted 15 cartridges into the magazine through a gate in the side of the frame. A simple forward-and-back movement of the trigger-guard lever carried the cartridge from the magazine to the barrel chamber and simultaneously re-cocked the hammer. Repeating rifles were a significant advance over the preceding breech-loaded single-shot rifles, as they allowed a much greater rate of fire. As someone once said of the Winchester lever-action rifle, "you could load it on Sunday and shoot all week long".



Whatever the origin of the five Winchesters in the National Museum's collection, "The Gun that Won the West" is still a true classic with many admirers both here and abroad.

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