

# He Invented the Gun That Helped Tame the Frontier

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

NINETY-NINE years ago this month—on February 25, 1836, to be exact—there was issued in Washington, D. C., a patent for an invention which probably attracted little attention at the time but which was destined to be a maker of American history. During the next three quarters of a century it would not only become a common name (analogous in usage to Pullman for a sleeping car and Ford for an automobile) but it would also be an important factor in taming the American frontier and "revolutionize military tactics."

That last is a quotation from the recent biography of the man to whom the patent was issued—"Yankee Arms Maker—the Incredible Career of Samuel Colt." written by Jack Rohan and published by Harper and Brothers. For the invention which was patented just a century ago was the revolver, the first successful firearm of its kind in history.

Connected with Samuel's Colt's revolver are two interesting paradoxes. One of them is that this weapon, which would become so much a symbol of the "Wild West," was produced by a native of one of the oldest-settled parts of the East. The other is that it, an instrument in the conquest of a wild land, had its real genesis at sea.

Samuel Colt was born in Hartford, Conn., July 19, 1814, the third son of Christopher and Sarah (Caldwell) Colt. His mother was a daughter of Maj. John Caldwell, a veteran of the Revolution. The fact that she was the daughter of a soldier and therefore had no prejudices against firearms probably had much to do with her son's early interest in guns. At the age of eleven Sam Colt was indentured to a farmer near Glastonbury and during his service there two factors had a decided influence in shaping his future career.

The only books in this farm home were the Bible, the almanac and a volume known as the "Compendium of Knowledge." Young Colt spent most of his spare time reading the latter. In it he found considerable scientific information—an extended account of the work of Robert Fulton, "inventor" of the steamboat, an article describing the galvanic battery and a formula for making gunpowder.

Even more important, however, was the time he spent during his errands to the village store where, according to his biographer, "cracker-barrel philosophers weighed the destiny of the republic. The outstanding doings of the Revolution were still being discussed. From men who had the story from their fathers when it was fresh new; from the recollections of old men who had been on the ground, Sam heard the legend of the shooting of General Fraser, at Saratoga, by Tim Murphy, and of other marvelous deeds Murphy had performed with his double-barreled rifle. Wide-eyed with intelligent interest, the lad often listened to speculation as to the casualties that might have been inflicted had the whole Continental army been armed with like weapons. If some nation could invent a gun that would shoot five or six times without reloading, that nation would rule the world, in the opinion of the Glastonbury military observers. But of course the thing was impossible. Sam, listening mouse-like as he waited for the storekeeper to put up his order, missed nothing of what was said.

"Analyzing the discussions at his leisure, he discovered that Robert Fulton and several other inventors had accomplished things deemed impossible—until they were done. He concluded that the local forum's opinion on repeating firearms might not, after all, be infallible. He decided he would be an inventor and create the 'impossible' gun."

Thus was the germ of the idea planted in the Yankee boy's mind. It developed a little farther a year later when he went to work in his father's textile plant at Ware, Mass. There he had access to various chemicals and the opportunity to borrow tools of all kinds from the millwrights. Expanding upon the idea of Tim Murphy's double rifle, he bound four barrels together and tried to make them revolve so that each, in turn, would come under the lock and fire. But more often than not all four fired at once so he had to give it up as a bad job.

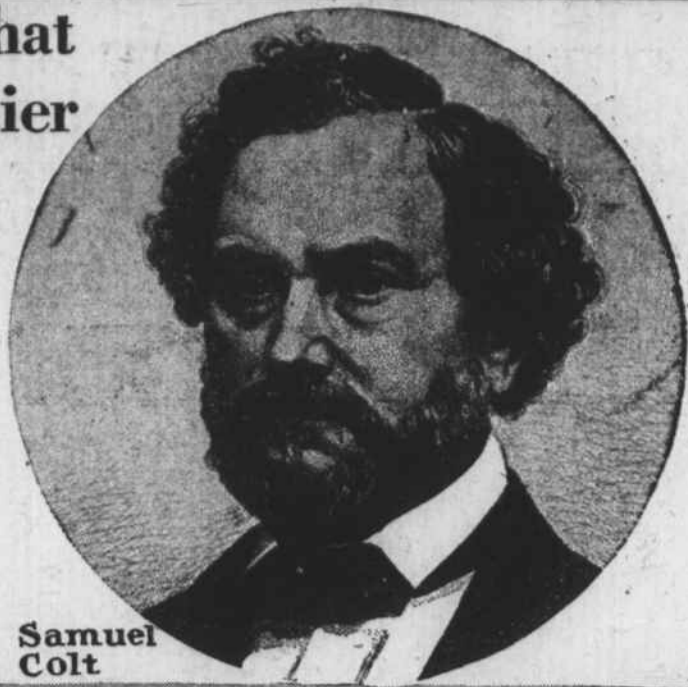
Next he was apprenticed to a Captain Spaulding of the brig "Corlo" which was sailing from Boston on a voyage to Calcutta, India. Young Sam wasn't especially thrilled over life as a sailor but he did enjoy watching some of the old salts carve odd little knick-knacks out of wood. While he had been employed in the textile factory at Ware, he had made the acquaintance of a young mechanic named Elisha K. Root who had explained to him the value of making working drawings and then wooden models of some of the things he was trying to invent.

Watching the sailors carve, Sam remembered Root's advice about models and set about learning to carve. "He acquired considerable proficiency, but when the voyage was half over he was without any idea on which to construct a model," says Rohan. But one day in the Indian ocean a real inspiration came to him.

"Standing idly watching the steersman, he noticed that, regardless of which way the wheel was spun, each spoke always came directly in line with a clutch that could be set to hold it. He watched for a long time and finally caught himself envisioning holes in the rim—holes which successively came in alignment with a stationary aperture—which the young inventor's imagination identified as the bore of a pistol. The revolver was conceived! Sam had found use for his leisure. With the jackknife that cost less than a dollar, he started to whittle out the foundation of a fortune which was to run into millions!"

By the time the voyage was over he had a working model of his revolver, complete in every detail and satisfactory in performance. Upon his return home he showed his invention to his father, who caught his son's enthusiasm, promised to finance the making of two revolvers and to pay for obtaining the patents if they worked as successfully as Sam said they would.

However, the gunsmiths whom Christopher Colt engaged to make the revolvers looked upon the idea as "boyish nonsense and thoroughly unworkable." Also, they wanted to charge so much for their work that the elder Colt's enthusiasm cooled and he decided not to waste much money on the guns. So he engaged an ordinary mechanic to do the work. He turned out a crude piece of workmanship which was far from being a faithful reproduction of young Sam's idea. The result was that one of the revolvers wouldn't fire at all and the other burst at the first shot. Undiscouraged by this experience, young Sam told his father that he would never rest until he had secured a competent gunsmith, who could do the precise fitting and delicate adjusting necessary to a revolver, and had given his invention a fair trial. So he went back to work in his father's textile mill, hoping to save enough money from his earnings to employ a man who could make a revolver as it should be made. But it was several years before he was able to get enough ahead to hire John Pearson, a skilled



Samuel Colt



The Cavalry Charge  
By FREDERIC REMINGTON

All pictures shown above, from Rohan's "Yankee Arms Maker—the Incredible Career of Samuel Colt," courtesy, Harper and Brothers, publishers.



mechanic, to set up a gunshop in Baltimore and begin making samples of his revolvers.

He also interested his father in the project again and the result was a trip to Europe where he secured patents on his weapon in England, Prussia and France. Returning to America he borrowed \$800 from his father and went to Washington where on February 25, 1836, his historic patent was granted. Then he set about organizing a corporation to manufacture and market his weapon and on March 5, 1836, the New Jersey legislature chartered the "Patent Arms Manufacturing Company" of Paterson.

But despite this triumphal culmination of the young Yankee's efforts to create the "impossible gun," his future path to success was a rocky one. There were quarrels with his relatives over the management of the company in which they had invested their money, there were all sorts of financial troubles, struggles with competitors, lawsuits over patent infringements and other difficulties for this pioneer industrial enterprise.

To the student of the history of American business and industry this new biography of Samuel Colt is interesting because it shows that he "was the first of the great American industrialists. Colt, not the modern motor car manufacturer, conceived and first utilized standardized machine production, division of labor and the 'assembly line.'"

"He was one of the first, if not the first, large-scale employer to assume responsibility for the well-being of his employees. Colt showed the way to the modern promoters of wars . . . he was the precursor of the modern munitions kings—a pioneer in the art of playing one nation against another to increase his sales."

Equally interesting is the part which his weapon played in the military history of this country and more particularly in the history of the frontier. Unable to convince "moss-backed brass hats" in the War department that his revolver and his revolving rifle were superior to the smooth-bore musket and single-shot horse pistol to which they were devoted, he next tried to get the Navy department to adopt them. But again he was unsuccessful. Then the panic year of 1837 almost wiped out his business.

But an Indian war saved him—the war with the Seminoles in Florida. Gen. Thomas S. Jesup, quartermaster general of the army, was in charge of operations against the Seminoles and his second in command was Col. William S. Harney, a fine field officer, who regarded Colt's invention with great favor. Harney realized that "the revolvers were just the arms needed in the peculiar type of war waged by the Indians. The tactics of the Seminoles were simple. They would lie in ambush for the federal soldiers and make a feint attack, drawing the fire from the single-shot muskets. Then, while the soldiers were reloading they would swarm over them with the main Indian force and annihilate them. Troops armed with guns shooting six times would be a sad surprise to the Indians and Colonel Harney was soldier enough to know it."

clusively to the War department their value as weapons for our soldiers. Another significant event at about this time was Colt's meeting with Capt. Sam H. Walker, a famous Texas Ranger leader, who had come to Washington with a delegation of frontiersmen to urge the admission of the new Republic of Texas as a state in the federal Union.

Up to this time Colt had been making a .34 caliber revolver but out of his conference in New York with Walker came the .44 caliber Walker-Colt which soon became a favorite weapon on the southwest frontier. A few years later this gun became even more significant in that part of the country.

By the time Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845 war between Mexico and the United States was inevitable. President Polk sent a force under Gen. Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande to "protect" the new state against its former rulers, the Mexicans. When a detachment of American cavalry was ambushed by a Mexican patrol, its commander, a Captain Thornton, was the only man who escaped and he had shot his way to freedom with a brace of Colt revolvers.

General Taylor was impressed by this fact and asked for more information about these weapons. Capt. Sam Walker of the Rangers, who was guarding Taylor's lines of communications, told the general that the only thing wrong with the revolvers was that there were not enough of them. Thereupon Taylor sent Walker to Washington to make known this need to the President and the result was an order on Colt for 1,000 of his revolvers, which he at once supplied. More than that he put over as clever a publicity campaign as any modern press agent ever thought of doing.

"It was not the sales of his revolvers to the army that made Sam Colt," says Rohan. "It was the manner in which he capitalized the victories of the Americans over numerically superior forces. The revolvers in use at Resaca de la Palma, Monterey and Buena Vista were few and far between. But those few, when Sam Colt got to spreading the story around the world, accounted for the defeat of the Mexicans. And the latter, glad of any excuse for their humiliation, cheerfully corroborated his claim!"

"If the Mexican war gave Sam Colt his first real start, the War Between the States sent his enterprise booming toward the pinnacle of success. The extent of that conflict soon called for production of the new weapon on a bigger scale than ever before. In 1861 the Colt factories turned out nearly 70,000 revolvers. The next year production jumped to more than 110,000. But the inventor did not live to see the amazing success of the thing which he had whittled out of wood on the brig "Corso." He died January 10, 1862, but others carried on his work.

When the war ended and Americans set about to conquer the last frontier, Colt's invention became increasingly important in that conquest. It hung at the hip of virtually every horseman of the plains, whether Texas Ranger, trooper in the United States army, cowboy, frontier marshal or outlaw. It barked in cavalry charges against the wild tribesmen of the Comanche, the Sioux and the Cheyenne; its roar was heard in many a frontier dance hall and saloon in the cow towns on the Texas cattle trails. It became not only a synonym for a certain type of firearm and a common name, but it also became a symbol of the reign of law in a lawless land. "Judge Colt" was judge, jury and executioner and a man's life depended upon the quickness of the "draw."

That era ended just 30 years after Sam Colt died. One event was significant of its close. Into the little town of Coffeyville, Kan., one day in 1892, rode the Daltons. When one of the hottest street battles ever fought in the West was over, the Daltons, last of the old-time bandit gangs, had been wiped out. The "Wild West" was no more. Incidentally, among the weapons found in the streets of Coffeyville that day was the Colt "frontier six-shooter" which is pictured above and which hangs on the wall of the room in which this article is being written.

## Jiffy Knit Sweater With Matching Hat

PATTERN No. 5512



Any four-to-eight-year-old will be warm as toast in this sweater and cap set. The sweater's a "jiffy" knit—just plain knitting combined with yoke and sleeves of easy lacy stitch, and finished almost before you know it. The cap done in a straight strip, gathered at the top, also includes these two stitches, adding a pert pompon for good measure. Choose a colorful yarn, and there'll be no "insisting" she wear it!

In pattern 5512 you will find complete instructions for making the set shown in sizes 4, 6 and 8 (all given in one pattern); an illustration of it and of the stitches needed; material requirements.

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Tung oil, which is pressed from the nuts of the tung tree, was for years available only in China. Now tung trees, in increasing numbers, are being cultivated in the southern-most states of this country. Tung oil is used as an ingredient of some paints to facilitate quick drying and is also used in varnish to make it waterproof.

## The Mind Meter

By LOWELL HENDERSON

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### The Syllables Test

In this test there are two columns of syllables. Take a syllable out of the first column and unite it with one in the second column to form a word. When you are finished, you should have ten words.

First Column	Second Column
1. ros	1. tuce
2. pal	2. lise
3. na	3. cord
4. prem	4. rel
5. let	5. sar
6. cou	6. try
7. con	7. lect
8. col	8. trum
9. bar	9. pon
10. bur	10. sal

**Answers**

1. rostrum	6. coupon
2. paltry	7. concord
3. nasal	8. collect
4. premise	9. barrel
5. lettuce	10. burjar

**Life in Need of Love**  
Life, like all else, needs to be lived; those who cannot love life are vanquished from the very start.—Roman.

## Motorists Bump Into Grim Reaper; Cases Dismissed

Police Lieutenant R. L. D. Nord of Los Angeles requested dismissal of traffic complaints against Richard Morton, William J. Lyons and J. E. Thompson, "On what grounds?" asked Municipal Judge Newell Carn. "These men are dead, your honor," said Nord. "They were killed in traffic."

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The patented feature of two extra layers of Gum-Dipped cords under the tread locks the massive super traction tread securely to the body of the tire. This patented Ground Grip tread is made wider, heavier and deeper, with scientific spacing between the bars so that the tire is self-cleaning, yet rides smoothly on improved roads. These patented construction features are used only in Firestone Tires. This is why you get greatest traction, longest life and outstanding performance in Ground Grip Tires. They are the best investment a farmer can make.

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**Firestone**

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