

Weapons That Won The West

By D. R. KING, High River, Alta.

FROM this year of 1950 let us jump ahead four years to 1954. Then we'll go back a full hundred years. Now we're ready to start. 1854 was the year that the gunsmith partnership of Smith & Wesson brought out their first pistol. Undoubtedly you know what a lever-action rifle looks and works like. Well, take the lever action, put it into a handgun and you will have a good idea of the first Smith & Wesson repeating pistol to be manufactured. Called the "Volcanic", it featured a tube magazine beneath the barrel. The trigger guard doubled as the lever to jack open the action and cock the hammer.

In 1856 they introduced a revolver using .22 rim fire self-contained ammunition. At the same time, and until four years later they produced this same gun in a .32 calibre R.F. metallic cartridge. Pictured above as S-8, this is a rather unique weapon. To break, the catch just below the front of the cylinder is raised whereupon the entire barrel may be lifted to wing upwards and back. Next the cylinder is drawn from its pin and cartridges fitted into five chambers. Upon loading and locking, a semi-concealed trigger allows the single-action hammer to fall upon and fire the cartridge. To eject the empty, the arm is broken, the cylinder taken and reversed, and the empty case may be forced out by ramming through with the fixed rod located below the barrel. The cylinder stop, placed at the top, is actuated by the hammer and doubles as rear sight. Finished in bright nickel with walnut butt stocks, the arm possibly was the travelling companion of some frontier day gentleman. Its entire history is not known, however the way in which I happened on to it bears repeating. While speaking to Charlie Short of High River, the subject naturally got around to guns.

"I don't suppose that old gun of mine would be any good to you," he stated matter-of-factly. I tried to conceal my interest. "That all depends," I hedged. "I would sure like to have a look at it, though."

"Well it's out at the farm somewhere, but I'll bring it in next time I go out that way," he promised.

Some weeks later he came into the store to see me. On the counter he laid the Smith & Wesson. Then he told me how it had come into his possession. He had picked it up on the old Macleod Trail at High River in 1885. How it got there, who lost it, he could not say. It is possible some traveller on the stage or riding alone may have dropped it just there. At any rate another little bit of interest has been added to the story of Alberta.

After the advent of the '58 revolver, we jump to the years '69 and '70. In the former year the boys put out one of the more famous shooting irons in the West. This revolver, of calibre .44, was one of the first real precision built weapons with parts that were actually interchangeable. The following year they produced the .44 Russian, one of the most outstanding military weapons ever made. From then on came a succession of improvements in handguns, pouring in a steady stream



from the doors of Smith & Wesson. 1887—the double-action .38; 1888—New Departure .38, first really safe handgun and still in use in most banks in Canada today; 1891—the famous single shot .22 target pistol, whose long barrel and precision workmanship has been responsible for every .22 pistol record; 1902—New Military and Police models, 1,250,000 made to date; 1917—the .45 Army, using S & W's patented half-moon clip to adapt regular automatic shells to revolver use; 1930—the .38/44 Heavy Duty used by State Police troopers, introducing high speed cartridges; 1935—development of Smith & Wesson's outstanding ".357 Magnum", the most powerful side arm ever made, delivering 1510 ft./seconds of muzzle velocity. Latest revolver to come off the tables is their beautiful .22 target pistol, the K-22 Masterpiece.

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In 1941, just after Pearl Harbor, Frank and Harold Wesson, third generation of Wessons to take the reins of the famous gun works, took on the tremendous job of supplying the Allied forces with sidearms. Through their unstinting labor towards this goal the Smith & Wesson .38 Cal. "Victory" model became known as "The Most Reliable Sidearm Ever Built".

No. 60 in the photo shows the 1914 make of the New Military and Police model. Issued to Canadian Army officers during World War II, the piece shown was carried in duty at Hong Kong, where it was captured by the enemy. At cessation of hostilities the Royal Canadian Navy re-took the port and in the ensuing occupation George Deibert of High River was able to recapture the weapon.

History proves that the Colt has written its name across the entire Northwest, but I wonder how many know that the Smith & Wesson featured side by side with it through the explosive years of discovery and settlement of our Alberta.

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