



The Antique Arms Gazette

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Collecting Antique Guns

I am often asked for advice on collecting antique guns – everything from what to collect, to how to buy and what to look for. I am by no means an expert, but I have been collecting since I was 18, so that's some forty years. I started with pocket automatics back in the days when .25 and .32 ACP was still legal. I had a nice cross-section of Colts, Brownings, Berettas and a Walther PPK, and even some Eibar knock-offs of Browning pocket autos. I also collected Mauser rifles and my collection spanned from the single shot 1872 carbine to the 1950's, from all over the world. When I started collecting, I bought just about anything I liked but I soon realized that I had to limit myself to a narrower field of interest. I had Mosin Nagant rifles, a Springfield, a Lee-Enfield, a few shot guns and a Swedish Ljungman. So, in the interest of furthering my primary interest in Mauser, I sold all the others and so made room, both in my display as well as my budget, for more Mausers. The same happened with my handguns – I sold my Webley, Ruger, S&W and the big 9mm Steyr to concentrate on pocket autos. Later, of course, I changed my mind about the lot and sold them all. That was the down payment for my first house. It was worth it...

Nowadays, I concentrate on antiques. In particular, I collect pin fire pistols and revolvers. So far, I am not specializing any further and my collection still has room for a few more. I can see the day coming however when I will have to narrow down my field of interest even further and perhaps concentrate on French, Belgian or German pin fires. I know some collectors who only collect Eugene Lefauchaux pin fires, others only Liege-made (Belgian) pistols, and others concentrate on just English shotguns. Some very advanced collections contain only variations of one model (like the Colt 1849 pocket, Winchester Model 1866, Henry, etc), or one particular serial number range associated with specific events or times in history (Civil War, American Revolution,, WW II, etc.) Each of

these fields offers a great variety of examples to look for, and the advanced collector will find the hunt for the elusive and rare exciting and challenging. But, let's not talk about my collection, and rather discuss the subject in general:

Starting a collection:

We all start with that first piece which catches our interest and fascination. It may be its shape, its history or something special about it, and we soon realize there are others like it, either loosely connected or very closely related to what we already have and we must have that one too, in order to complement what we already possess. We buy the next piece, and so set out on that journey of the collector. I think it was the late Norm Flayderman who described gun collecting to courting a pretty girl: from first discovery, through courtship to the final "conquest" it is exhilarating, fun and exciting, yet also painful and frustrating, marred by loss and disappointment but something you get hooked on and want to do over and over again, despite the disappointments. Maybe I wouldn't be so philosophical about it, but I get his point. This is where the first caution should be observed: the beginning collector often buys indiscriminately and unwisely, investing large sums of money in frivolous "wall hangers" which will bog down his collection later. This is not to say that we shouldn't all experiment with what we want to collect, it should just be done with a bit of "big picture" foresight. The attitude that "I can always sell it again if I don't like it anymore" is easier said than done, and when the time comes to sell that unwanted article to make room for one you really want, it may not be easy to dispose of...

Buying:

This one I get all the time. How do I buy an antique gun and make sure it is good value? The answer is simple: what is it worth to you? Yes, there are "book values" to every antique gun, but in the end it depends on

how badly you want the piece, on how it fits into your collection, and how appreciative you are of the gun. Take the following example:

I once bought a Spanish pin fire revolver which was profusely inlaid with gold and silver, it was of superb workmanship and in near-mint condition. The maker is largely unknown, the whole pin fire collecting community still small and prices are generally lower than those fetched by the more popular cartridge and percussion pistol market. I paid, what even then I thought was an exorbitant amount of money, but the incredibly well executed artistry of the gun made it worth every penny to me. I still have this gun and it is one of my most cherished pieces. I really do not care to know if it is indeed worth what I paid for it; it is worth it to me. I have many others like it, guns which are special in their own right and fit into my collection as I want them to. I also have many a piece which I bought for much less than they would be valued at, simply because the vendor either did not know what he had, or didn't care. This is where the next point of caution comes in.

Do your research:

The internet is a wondrous thing. Never before could anyone become an instant expert on a multitude of subjects in minutes without ever lifting a finger to leaf through a book or visit a library. When I started collecting guns, there was no internet, no on-line forums and no on-line sales. Guns were bought at auctions, in person, or through shops, dealers or individual private sellers. You had to go there, look at the piece and hopefully come prepared – meaning going to the library or consulting your own books before contemplating a purchase. In my early days I frequently bought something "on the spot" and tried to find out later what it was I actually had bought. Not a wise course of action if you are concerned about the value of your purchase.

Norm Flayderman was often asked about his vast knowledge of guns and edged weapons, and he routinely pointed at his immense and expansive library of books and periodicals behind his desk to explain his wisdom. He relied on his research to guide his judgement. This is how he became one of the most trusted authorities on historical guns and weaponry. The lesson in this? With collecting comes the need to know your subject. Invest in books, scour the internet and talk to fellow collectors. When you are ready to make that special purchase, and you realize you know more about the gun than the seller does, you will have the upper hand and are likely to score a better deal, or at the very least, you will recognize the pieces which are a good fit for your collection.

Comparing apples to apples:

Inexperienced collectors sometimes look at my guns and say "I can get this one for half the price on the internet. Why so much?" Well, I say, is the one you saw on the internet identical? Same condition, same configuration, same age? Probably not. There can be huge differences in value between antique guns of seemingly the same type and make however even small variances in condition rating, finish and function can make a huge difference in value. Look at the difference between martial and commercial weapons of the same make, for example. A martially marked Colt in fine condition will likely fetch more than the same gun, in the same condition from the commercial market. The reason is simple: a gun issued to a military unit is likely to see much more action and use than one sold to a private individual. Therefore, it would be much more difficult to find a military gun in fine condition than a commercially sold weapon which spent most of its life in a sock drawer. This is not to say that such a fine antique is not worth having, but it should be understood that there are differences in value depending on the origin of the gun. Of course, when the condition of two guns of the same make and model is different, the value can be affected drastically – guns which have been altered or refinished, had parts replaced or swapped out, are not functional, or have parts missing lose their value to a large degree when compared to a specimen which is complete, functional and in fine condition. So, in short, there may be a good reason why some antique guns fetch a better price than others of the same type and manufacture.

Provenance:

This is a subject mostly reserved for the advanced collector, and the novice should be very careful before investing premium dollars in an otherwise ordinary antique just because someone "famous" is said to have owned it. Provenance can increase the value of an antique drastically if it can be

demonstrated, for example, that a particular martial weapon was issued to a particular officer in a particular unit during the Civil War. The collector must be cautioned against the verbal claims of sellers about possible historical significance of the piece, however, and unless there is physical proof (sworn affidavits, documentation by expert historians or appraisers, bonafide letters from previous owners or persons who were eye witnesses, etc.), the buyer should be very careful not to let such claims cloud his better judgement. On the other hand, however, if the history of a particular gun can be documented (no matter how insignificant in the larger scheme of things), it still can add significant value to the piece.

Fakes and fakes:

While it is always possible that someone will try to sell the beginning collector a fake, it is quite rare as a poor fake is easy to spot, and a good fake is usually expensive to produce and reserved for high-end antiques which are usually out of the beginner's reach anyway. The interesting fakes are those which were intended to fool a buyer back in the day when they were made – such as 19th century fakes of medieval swords and armour which enjoy a collecting following of their own today, or a "counterfeit" of a well-known brand-name product such as the "Eibar" knock-offs of Browning and Colt guns made in the early 1900's. No one today would consider them authentic (and few would consider themselves "fooled" by one of them), and they are as collectible today as the originals, although they usually do not fetch the same price as an original would. It is when the faker makes critical errors in his imitation that the collectability increases...



A counterfeit Iver Johnson 12mm pin fire revolver. How can you tell?



It is stamped "River Johnson Arms & Cycle Works..."

When I came across the fake Iver Johnson, I knew I had to have it, just for the fact that it was a poorly counterfeit revolver of European manufacture (Belgian, actually). It was obvious right away as anyone who knows a little about Iver Johnson would be able to tell: Johnson was well known in America, but his company was never so big that he produced guns in, or for, the European market. This being a pin fire, it would be extremely unlikely to have come from the Fitchburg Arms and Cycle Works. No, this one was probably made by a small maker in Belgium who obviously thought his chances of selling his wares would be better if they bore the name of a famous American gun maker. He only neglected to do his proper research, though...

A more commonly encountered problem is that of conversion of a gun from one caliber to another, or one ignition system to another. For example, once cartridges became more readily available, some manufacturers converted existing percussion revolvers to accept cartridges. This was usually what is called a "period alteration" and is not considered a fake. These guns are well known as conversions, and are priced accordingly. A more serious conversion is that from a flint lock to a percussion lock. Although these would also be considered "period alterations" the converted guns usually do not fetch the same price as one left with its original flint lock. High quality conversions are sometimes converted back to a flintlock by a modern gun smith in an attempt to increase the gun's value, but unless the re-converted gun is clearly marked by the modern gun smith as such, it should be considered a fake. There are numerous ways to tell if a gun has been re-converted, however there is not enough room in this letter to go into such detail.

Finally, a word about antiques converted to a different caliber from the original. It is quite common for shooters to convert a .455 Webley to accept .45ACP cartridges as they are easier to come by than .455, for example. The same goes for converting .32 and .38 rim fire to center fire. This is a dangerous practice and the inexperienced collector is well advised to stay away from such conversions for two reasons. One, simple safety. Most of these old guns were made to shoot low-pressure black powder loads and not modern ammunition with its high-power loads. They can blow up on you.... Secondly, Canadian law explicitly excludes guns which have been converted to accept modern ammunition from the classification of an "antique". A pre-1898 rim fire handgun with a 2 inch barrel would be perfectly legal as an antique, but prohibited if it were converted to .32 short Colt or .38 S&W...