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Las Vegas Antique Gun Show

The Las Vegas Antique Gun Show is said to be the biggest and best in North America. With over 90,000 square feet of display and more than 600 vendors, it is truly one of the world's Greats. I met dealers from France, Holland and Britain, as well as all the famous dealers and auction houses from across the US. Although there was a lot of junk (there always is), I also saw pieces truly worthy of a museum. Take the \$1.2 Million Colt Third Model Dragoon, for example...



This Colt 3rd Model Dragoon is estimated to fetch between \$1.2 and \$1.9 MILLION

Once "back on earth" I started looking for merchandise more in my own price range. It took a lot of searching, asking questions and going back again and again until I found what I was a) looking for and b) could afford / find resale value in. There were many collectors there who were not really interested in selling their guns, which was obvious as they were asking prices which were unreal. Many thought they had some sort of national treasure on their table. There was no deal to be had there. Once I had established a rapport with some of them it became easier to talk price. I found an incredible W. Bond brass barrel blunderbuss which, although expensive, I could not pass up. Found a couple of excellent Colt Pockets, two pristine Remington revolvers, as well as a couple of really fine London flintlock pocket pistols. In retrospect it was a good show, way more expensive than I had thought, even more so with the US dollar exchange.

Vegas in general is very expensive, and there are a lot of poor, homeless people around when you look beyond the glitz and dazzling lights. During the day it seems the entire town suffers from a massive hang-over, people squint their eyes in the sun and seem generally in a bad mood. As soon as the sun goes down though, the party starts anew and it doesn't stop until sunrise. Non-stop shows, music, restaurants and bars, not to mention the 24/7 casino action. It's a party town, without doubt. Everyone is trying to get into the action and the amount of people tugging at your wallet is astounding. I had a run-in with a couple of "chorus girls" in costume who tried to charge me \$40 for taking their picture! That did not go over very well... Others try to sell you stuff in the street, from pot to unlicensed souvenirs. This was only the second time I have been there, and I think I'm good for a while again. Maybe next year I'll do the show just for two days instead of four...



More than 600 tables in two rooms. All antiques!



\$19,000 for this gold-inlaid Colt Navy



Some very fine 18th Century flintlocks

Gun Detective

Quite often I am asked to go out on a limb and advise a customer if the antique he is about to purchase is a "shooter". My response is always the same: although the gun looks perfectly fine, I cannot know what it has been through in its life. It is one thing to look at a modern gun and make this judgement based on the action, the bore and the general appearance, but it is an entirely different story when the gun is 150+ years old. It may look good, but who knows? A very fine-looking percussion revolver may have been shot repeatedly with a more powerful charge than what it was designed for, or a previous owner may have used a bullet which was too big and took too much pressure to travel down the barrel. This could make the barrel rupture one day, and it just may be the first time the new owner tries it out... these old guns were made of a different grade of steel we have today, and some of them even used untreated components as their moving parts. Many of these guns were designed to last for maybe a couple of hundred shots, but no more. In the past 150 years it may never have been shot once, but the various owners probably worked the action hundreds of times, wearing the soft surfaces on the hammer, sear, and trigger down as if they had seen hard service in the field. Ignorant owners may have "dry-fired" these old guns over and over, damaging nipples, cracking hammers and chafing down cylinder stops. This is where it would be handy to have "detective" training. An antique can't talk, and tell you how it has been abused over the years, but if you look closely, you may be

able to pick up on some tell-tale signs:

1. Original or not?

Most guns are serial-numbered, and often this number is repeated on all the major components – frame, barrel, cylinder. Even hammers, triggers, ejectors and trigger guards are often marked with at least a portion of the serial number. If these do not match it means a part has worn out or been damaged in the past and replaced (one does need to differentiate between serial numbers and assembly numbers – sometimes confusing!). This does not necessarily mean that the gun is not safe however I would have my doubts. Who made the repairs? Did he do it properly??

Also, I always inspect the finish carefully. If the bluing looks very solid, without scratches or rub marks (high spots, side of cylinder, around muzzle) it may have been re-blued at some point. Again, if done properly and professionally, it may be of no concern but if it was done poorly, it may hide bigger issues: pitting and gouges under the blue are a sure sign that the gun was re-blued. If the exterior looks like mint and the bore is worn and bumpy, something is amiss. A gun with mint condition exterior finish should show original blue inside the bore as well, at least in the grooves. If the finish is worn, the wear and coloration should be even and the colors should be roughly the same all over. If the frame is badly pitted and shows no original finish, and the barrel is nicely blued, with sharp edges and markings there is a good chance the two were not meant to go together. The same applies to the grip scales: they should be of even coloration and show roughly the same amount of wear and discoloration on both sides. If they are mismatched, chances are at least one of them is a replacement. Not a big deal, but worth knowing. It should be noted though that a gun carried in a holster for many years will show uneven wear from where the gun rubbed against the leather, but that is usually quite obvious. The wood-to metal fit should be tight, without gaps or ridges showing. Undersizing can happen from shrinkage over time, but if the grips are bigger than the frame, there is something wrong. And, as is the case with the steel parts, if there are scratches and gouges underneath the varnish you know the grips have been refinished.

2. Internal Woos:

A much more difficult evaluation concerns the mechanics. Unless you take the gun apart (not something I like to do) you are not likely to be able to find out if all is well “inside”, and even then it is often not possible to know if the mechanics are trouble-free. Therefore, it is usually only possible to work the action gently to see if spring tension is reasonable, and the cylinder indexes correctly and locks up tight. I have had guns where a previous owner tied the broken ends of a main spring together with wire in an effort to make it work again.

Others use bits of wood or paper to make hammers, sears, cylinder pins and triggers seem tighter and more accurate. This works for a few moments, but will soon fall apart and the true condition of the gun becomes apparent.

3. Everybody is an Expert...

What frustrates me most is people trying to “fix” an antique when they do not have a clue, or are not interested in doing the job properly (ie said wired-together main spring). In my opinion a firearm has to be functional, no matter how old it is. If it is not, it's just an expensive paperweight. It doesn't have to be a “shooter”, but it has to work properly. If there is not even enough spring tension on the hammer to make it fall on its own, what is the point? If the cylinder does not index or lock, why bother? But that's just me. Another clue is drag lines on the cylinder. Although this may not be an issue, it is worth looking at because a broken cylinder bolt spring may make the bolt drag along the side of the cylinder, wearing off the finish. Getting a replacement for a spring like that may prove impossible.

4. Buyer Tip:

The value of an antique depends much on its condition, rarity and the current market demand. Recently a collector asked me why a J.M. Cooper percussion revolver in excellent condition would fetch less than a mediocre Colt 1849 Pocket. The two guns are almost identical in size and design – in fact, the Cooper is the better gun, as it is a double-action revolver made at a time when Colt was still struggling with that mechanism, however it will be valued at approximately half of a Colt of similar condition. It's all about demand. Colts just fetch more because they are more desirable among collectors. You are paying partly for the name. So, if you are new to collecting antique percussion revolvers, it may be a good idea to research the less-known makers like Cooper, Manhattan, Hopkins & Allen, Marston and Bacon. These guns are of excellent quality, at a fraction of the cost of a Colt or Remington.

Calgary Show

This year's Calgary gun show was held on March 30 and 31, several weeks before the usual Easter week end dates. I actually prefer a time other than Easter, because Easter is a time for family and friends. The organizers were worried that the different time would cause visitors to stay away, but not so! It was a very busy show, with 1000 tables and close to 10,000 visitors. It was the best one I ever had. Sales were brisk, much information was exchanged, and much was learned. I brought back a few new pieces (not as many as Vegas) and all in all it was worth the trip across the mountains...

Manhattan Firearms Mfg. Co.

I have had a few Manchattans in the past, and I know a little about the company however

until I came across Waldo Nutter's book about the Manhattan Firearms Manufacturing Company, I did not know the history of this interesting 19th century venture: With the expiration of Colt's 1836 patent on the ratcheting revolver mechanism in 1857, the flood-gates opened for many other makers to copy his design. Colt had applied to get an extension to the patent in 1850, which was granted for seven years, however his second attempt in 1857 was denied. Anticipating the 1857 expiration of the Colt patent, the Manhattan Fire Arms Manufacturing Company was founded in 1855 by a group of businessmen from Newark NJ. and New York City. The firm does not have the same romantic history as Colt, Smith and Wesson, Ethan Allen and perhaps Iver Johnson, all companies formed by talented, even genius inventors and engineers, but rather a business venture for business' sake. Manhattan Firearms began making pistols – single-shot, pepperboxes and later revolvers - with the assistance of Thomas Bacon, who was both an employee, as well as a contracted supplier of barrels to the new company. In 1857 Manhattan sued Bacon for competing with the firm when he started making complete revolvers of his own design, not just barrels for Manhattan. The company did not do very well for the first few years, even reducing its capital value by 50% in order to raise funds to continue production. It was not until the outbreak of the civil war that things began to look up for Manhattan. Their .36 caliber “Navy” revolver was a serious contender (and almost identical to Colt's 1851 “Navy”) however no government contracts could be secured. Even so, with the enormous need for sidearms, all makers saw a huge increase in business – Colt, Remington, and Starr were too busy supplying the Union forces to service the civilian and secondary market – Manhattan, Cooper, Marston, Bacon and others filled the gap by providing arms to the private market, and to those who had to supply their own sidearms in the conflict. Manhattan had a second label under which they sold their products which did not quite meet quality standards – the “London Pistol Company”. London Pistol marked specimens sometimes show small flaws in the engraving, or perhaps the casting of the frame, but are generally of the same quality as the “regular” Manchattans. Due to their relative rarity, “London Pistol” marked guns fetch a premium among collectors. The Manhattan Fire Arms Company produced a few cartridge revolvers late in their time, based on, among others, the S&W First Model .22 pocket revolver. Manhattan remained in business until 1868. The immediate years after the war resulted in a sharp down-turn in the US economy, especially the firearms industry, and as a result the firm was sold to the American Standard Tool Company.