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The Enigmatic Smith & Wesson “Schofield”

Perhaps the most famous revolver S&W ever produced was the Model 3 “Schofield”. Not that it was particularly successful, nor that they made millions of them, but rather the mystique and reputation it built in its short lifetime, and, of course, the many years since have made this one of the most sought-after S&W’s out there. It would seem that even today a Schofield will fetch 2 to 4 times as much as a “regular” No. 3 of similar condition.

To understand the Schofield, one has to go back and look at S&W’s line of Model 3’s first. The Model 3 is so named after the size of its frame, the “No. 3 frame”. The No. 1 frame was the small, .22 rim fire pocket revolver which gave S&W its start in 1858, the 2nd, the .32 rim fire, was the 6-inch barrel gun many union soldiers carried during the civil war as a personal back-up gun, and the Model 1 ½ was a smaller version of the No. 2, also in .32 rf, but built on a reduced frame introduced after the No. 2. They called it the Model 1 ½ because it fit between the Model 1 and the Model 2. The 3rd Model would become S&W’s first large frame revolver. As early as 1862 the partners were approached by various dealers and government officials to design and produce a large-caliber handgun, however their efforts to adapt the No.2 frame – and design – to a larger caliber failed miserably: the tip-up barrel and frame assembly proved too weak for a .44 caliber cartridge, and the experimental guns kept getting blown apart. In 1867 they finally had a design worth of production: a .41 rim fire, four-shot, tip-up revolver which was formally introduced at the World Exposition in Paris. The response was luke-warm at best though, for one, the four-shot capacity didn’t excite anyone, and the tip-up barrel seemed too weak and inconvenient. The gun never made it into large-scale production. So, once again, large-caliber handgun design was put on the back burner, and S&W concentrated on converting Remington percussion revolvers to cartridge use instead. At that time,

S&W still held the Rollin White patent for the bored-through cylinder, and any cartridge conversions had to be done by S&W under contract. S&W not only charged Remington for the conversions, but they also received a handsome royalty for every percussion revolver they converted to cartridge use.

It was not until 1869 that Smith and Wesson had a viable design, protected by patents – some their own, some acquired from other inventors – which allowed them to produce a large caliber handgun which would be both effective as well as sustainable over time. The “Model 3” was born...

Tooling and ramp-up was slow, and the first Model 3, which would eventually become known as the Model 3 American First Model came off the factory floor in May of 1870. It was immediately submitted to the Army Small Arms Board for consideration as government contracts were the gravy any arms maker was hoping for. The new revolver made an immediate impression and government contracts soon began to materialize. More importantly for S&W, the Russian military attache to the US showed interest in the new gun, and soon inquired about a possible “Russian Model”, modified to his liking - .44 center fire, with an internally lubricated bullet. Smith and Wesson were on a roll. US government contracts, Russian contracts, sales to Turkey and Japan, plus commercial (civilian) sales... by 1878 some 235,000 of the various No. 3’s – American and Russian models – had been sold.

It was early on however that Brevet Colonel George W. Schofield became involved in the development of the No. 3. His brother, General John Schofield was the president of the Small Arms Board, and he undoubtedly alerted George of the new revolver S&W had submitted to the board. George, a cavalry officer, immediately contacted S&W and asked for a sample, which S&W (surprisingly) supplied. They shipped one of the new Model 3’s, with 500 rounds of

ammunition to George Schofield in Kansas Territory. Schofield examined the gun, tested it rigorously in the field, and made several changes which he thought would make the gun more useful to a soldier on horseback. He went so far as to have his improvements patented in 1871, and he submitted his improvements to S&W. The partners were receptive to his ideas, and, hoping for government contracts, agreed to produce the Model 3 “Schofield” on a trial basis, paying Schofield a \$.50 royalty on every gun sold. The new design was submitted to the ordnance board for trials, and Schofield himself proved to be its best salesman. The US government signed a contract for 3000 pieces in 1874 – only after the ordnance board had announced that it had decided to make the new Colt SA Army the standard side arm for infantry troops. This decision in itself would prove disastrous to the Schofield.

One of the Colonel’s improvements was to increase the caliber from .44 to .45. The government would have liked Smith and Wesson to chamber the new gun for the .45 Colt cartridge already widely in use however Dan Wesson did not like the Colt, and came up with his own: the .45 S&W Schofield. Production and supply of this cartridge were problematic from the outset: S&W had an acrimonious relationship with Winchester, and the two companies blamed each other for lack of supply, poor quality and problems with loading, firing and extraction. The biggest problem however was the design of the .45 Schofield compared to the .45 Colt: it is slightly shorter than the Colt, and the cylinder of the Schofield revolver is also shorter than the Colt. This meant that although one could use either Colt or S&W ammunition in a Colt SAA, this was not the case with the Schofield: one needed .45 S&W Schofield ammunition if one wanted to fire a Schofield. The inconsistency of supply, together with the confusion over which cartridge was good for which gun left many a soldier and frontiersman with a gun without bullets...

By 1876 the US government had ordered 7000 Schofields, and another 1800 or so were produced for the civilian market. The reviews from the customers, both military and civilian, were glowing: the accuracy of the gun, the man-stopping power, the ease and speed with which it could be loaded and fired from the saddle were far superior to the Remington and Colt revolvers in common use at the time, and made this the gun of choice for anyone who was in "hostile territory". Unfortunately, the confusion over the ammunition, the constant delays in delivering on the contracts due to Schofield's personal interference (he kept wanting to change things in mid-production stream) and the inconsistent supply of the ammunition caused the government pencil pushers to pull all Schofields out of service by early 1880, and no further orders were placed. Colonel Schofield himself tried on several occasions to convince the ordnance board to change their minds. He also continued to petition S&W to incorporate more improvements in order to make the gun more attractive to prospective buyers. Dan Wesson showed little interest in pursuing this project any further, though. His Russian contracts kept the factory at near-breaking capacity, and any new changes to the Schofield design – which would mean changes in tooling, production procedures and costs – would only interfere with the lucrative Russian business. If you do the math, you can see that Colonel Schofield made barely \$4400 off his design in royalties; still a sizeable amount of money in the 1870's, but certainly not the fortune he had hoped to make. Colonel Schofield died in 1882, and his son Chas. B. Schofield attempted to revive the production of his father's patent handgun, with no avail. "We would say in regard to this matter, that we see no immediate prospect of more of the "Schofield Smith & Wesson" revolvers being made, unless the Govt. of U.S. should give us and order for same. There is no demand for them in regular trade." (from a February 1883 letter to Chas. Schofield). All the Schofields in service were sold as government surplus to dealers like Schuyer, Hartley & Graham, and Francis Bannerman for about \$3 a piece. Many were cut down to 5 inches from their original 7 1/2 inches, and many were nickel plated to make them easier to sell to the civilian market. Others were sold to various state militia units around the US, and apparently the Wells Fargo Express company bought a quite few of them for their agents. To find a "Wells Fargo" marked Schofield would be a true find for any collector...

The Schofield revolver may not have had the stellar existence like the Colt SAA or the Remington Army, however there are few antique handguns with the same mystique and desirability attached to them as the Schofield Smith & Wesson...



Brevet Colonel George W. Schofield



Five revolvers built on the No. 3 frame from top left: 3rd Model Russian, 2nd Model Schofield, Double Action First Model, No.3 New Model Single Action, and another DA First Model

Las Vegas Antique Arms Show Retrospective

The annual Las Vegas show was held February 26 to March 1 of this year, and it was, once again, a treat to be there. Many of the guns on display were in the five or six figure range, and when you convert this to Canadian dollars, your heart suddenly sinks. Speaking with various vendors and collectors, it seems evident that the general feeling is positive and confident. Prices were up, sales were brisk, and lots of merchandise changed hands. I managed to pick up a good variety of cartridge revolvers, the best-selling items in my line-up. Flintlocks and percussion guns are not nearly as popular anymore, it would seem.

While there, I ended up at the Smith and Wesson Collectors' table, and had a very good chat with the gents manning the station. I was particularly interested in the serial number range for the Double Action First Model – high serial numbers are not likely to be considered antique by the RCMP as they were still manufactured in 1898. I had the pleasure of meeting Richard Nahas, the author of the "Standard Catalogue of Smith and Wesson", the "bible" for any S&W collector. He tried to help me find research on serial number records, however S&W only kept sales records, not production records. It was very kind of him to make a few phone calls, and ask some of the other experts at the show, but we didn't get much

further, unfortunately. Well, the quest goes on.



Hundreds of antique guns at the Las Vegas Show



These Beauties will go for about \$150,000



Sin City

There were over 600 tables at the Westgate Resort's convention center, plus a custom knife makers' show and a gun engraver's show as well. I particularly enjoyed the engravers. I have never seen such intricate work on a gun before. Some of their full-coverage engravings go for \$50,000 or more.

There may be no shows in Canada this year: Chilliwack is cancelled, Kamloops and Calgary may follow...