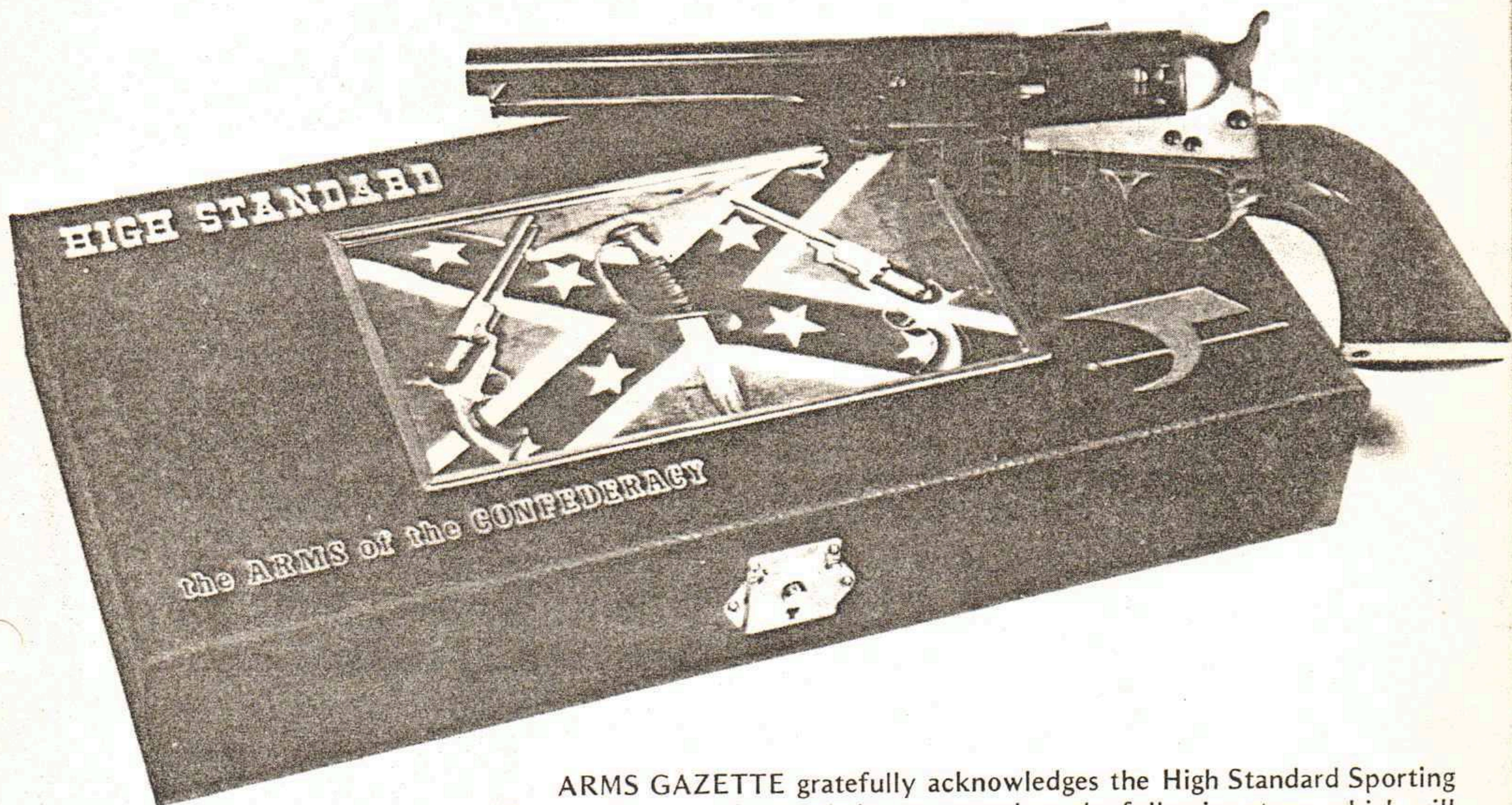


The Saga of Charles H. Rigdon



ARMS GAZETTE gratefully acknowledges the High Standard Sporting Firearms Company's permission to reproduce the following story, which will be contained in a pamphlet that will be distributed with the Leech and Rigdon Commemorative.

BY ARNOLD M. CHERNOFF

The American Civil War was, without a doubt, the most traumatic moment in our nation's history. That war has provided an almost endless source of material for historians, novelists, dramatists and poets as they attempt to capture on paper that nebulous "something" which has helped to form the American character.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the Civil War is the ingenuity and resourcefulness of southern manufacturers in supplying the armed forces of the Confederacy. As the war progressed and the hopes for a southern victory diminished, these men, faced with an ever increasing shortage of materials and skilled workmen, kept their factories and mills running and producing. Typical of this stubborn will to go on even in the face of overwhelming odds is the saga of Charles H. Rigdon, Confederate arms maker.

Charles H. Rigdon was a scale manufacturer who around 1844 moved his business from Cincinnati, Ohio to St. Louis, Missouri. From 1844 to 1859, Rigdon followed his trade as a scale maker in St. Louis, and became a part time engineer on a steam fire engine.

One might well ask at this point just how much did the career of scale manufacturing prepare Rigdon for a career as a firearms manufacturer. The answer is both simple and complex. The Industrial Revolution was still in its youth and it was possible for a talented mechanical engineer in the 1850's to be familiar with most phases of machinery. Rigdon was a scale maker, a field which required special skills in what was then considered precision machinery. It is also entirely possible that he might have been associated with some type of arms manufacturing in St.

Louis.

Attempts have been made to link Rigdon with the rather colorful career of Abel Shawk who had built the steam fire engine to which Rigdon was assigned as an engineer. In St. Louis, Shawk was associated with J. McLanahan in the manufacture of the Shawk and McLanahan percussion revolver. Interesting as the Rigdon-Shawk theory may be, no definite documentation exists to support the idea that they ever collaborated in revolver production in St. Louis.

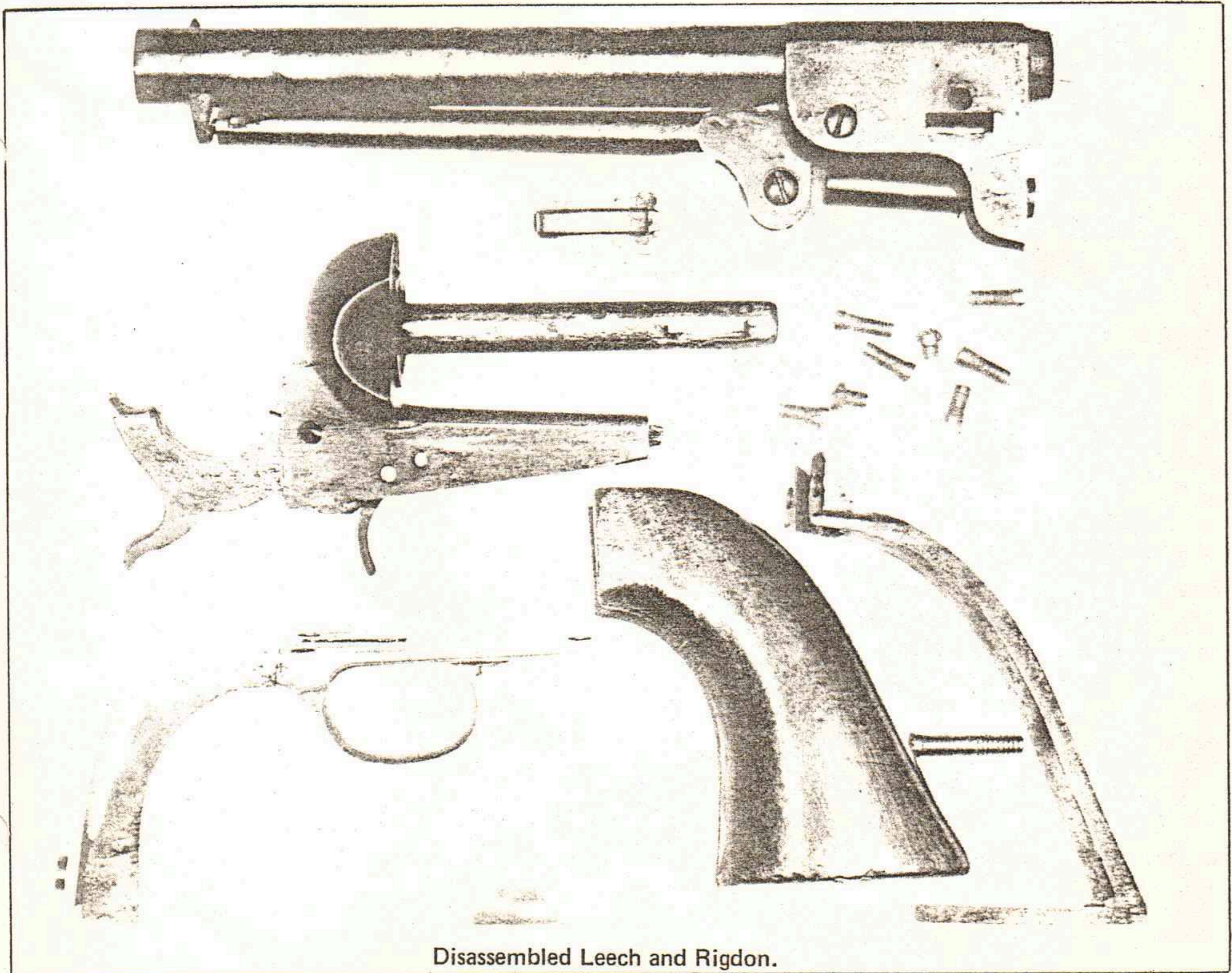
In 1859, Charles Rigdon set up his scale manufacturing enterprise in Memphis, Tennessee, where his path crossed that of Thomas Leech. Leech had been in Memphis for several years prior to Rigdon's arrival. Leech was a cotton broker who, with the advent of war, had turned his attention to the manufacture of war materials.

By late 1861, Leech's company, the Memphis Novelty Works, was busily engaged in making swords, sabers, bayonets, knives and other military accoutrements. In the spring of 1862, the Memphis Novelty works was being advertised as under the joint control of both Leech and Rigdon.

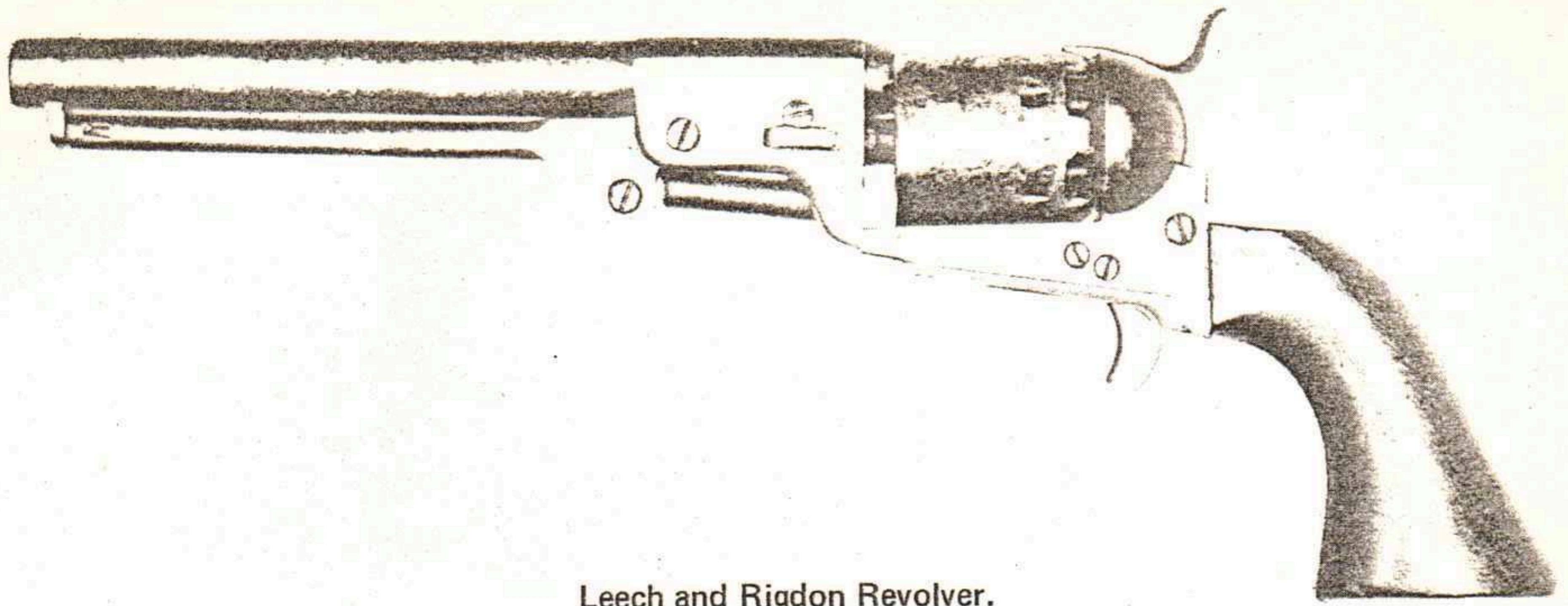
The technical skills of Rigdon had now formally combined with the organizational talents of Leech. Although there exists no documentation to support the claim, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between Rigdon and Leech had started much earlier. Rigdon and his machinery could well have been employed by Leech at the Memphis Novelty Works. Rigdon might have merely been a consultant to the firm who had asked for a partnership.

In March of 1862, Leech and Rigdon purchased a parcel of land in Columbus, Mississippi. This was to be the first of the company's moves as it attempted to stay out of the way of the Federal Army. The Confederate government had also selected Columbus as the site for an arsenal, a fact which probably influenced the partners' decision to relocate there. The following May, Leech and Rigdon closed down what was left of their operation in Memphis and joined their new manufacturing center in Columbus.

There is no actual proof that Leech and Rigdon manufactured revolvers in Memphis. None of their ads offer any such articles for sale. Their stay in Columbus represents a transition point for the firm. Some percussion revolvers seem to have been manu-



Disassembled Leech and Rigdon.



Leech and Rigdon Revolver.

factured here. The prime reason for the transition in production should be clear: There was more of a market for the "Colt" type revolver than there was for swords and accoutrements.

The respite offered Leech and Rigdon by their move to Columbus was all too brief. Late in 1862, the threat of a Federal invasion necessitated the removal of the Columbus arsenal to Selma, Alabama. Leech and Rigdon also packed up their equipment and, parting ways with the Confederate arsenal, moved their entire operation to Greensboro, Georgia.

In Greensboro, they purchased the building formerly used by the Greensboro Steam factory and set up their operation. In April of 1863, they disposed of all of their swordmaking materials. The principal thrust of the operation was now the manufacturing of percussion revolvers and, most likely, the servicing of small arms.

The total switch of the Leech and Rigdon manufacturing emphasis was not a "wildcat" move. As was mentioned above, there is reason to believe that some revolvers or "prototypes" were manufactured in Columbus and submitted to the Confederate Ordnance Board in the hope of securing a contract. On March 6, 1863, a contract was granted to the firm.

Although history has failed to record the reasons why, it did record that on December 13, 1863, the partnership between Thomas Leech and Charles Rigdon was dissolved. On January 27, 1864, Rigdon formed a new partnership with Jesse A. Ansley, Andrew Smith and Charles Keen. The new firm was now called "Rigdon, Ansley and Company" and was based in Augusta, Georgia. The new partnership continued to service the old contract made by Leech and Rigdon with the Confederate government.

Troubles started to plague the new partnership. In April of 1864, Ansley was apprehended by the local conscription board and charged with evading the draft. Ansley took his case to the Georgia Supreme Court where he received an adverse judgment in September. Shortly after his arrest, Ansley left the firm.

The war had now come to Charles Rigdon's

backyard. The employees of Rigdon and Ansley were organized into the Rigdon Guards, a local militia unit. On November 22, 1864, the Rigdon Guards, about sixty strong, sustained a number of casualties in the battle of Griswoldville, Georgia. The fight was one of the small ironies of the war. The Rigdon Guards were fighting to save the pistol manufacturing plant of their competitor, Sam Griswold. The Rigdon workmen fought well, but they fought in vain. Griswoldville fell to the federal troops and the revolver factory was burned down. On the following December 4th, the Rigdon Guards took part in the battle of Grahamville.

By the end of 1864, it was clear to most that the War For Southern Independence was a lost cause. Ten days after the Battle of Grahamville, Rigdon advertised his Augusta factory and its machines for sale. There were no buyers. In April, Union troops occupied Augusta. The Arms making odyssey of Charles H. Rigdon had finally come to an end.

After the war, Leech and Rigdon did come together briefly to dispose of their jointly held property in Columbus, Mississippi. Rigdon was able to find some employment as a mechanic in Memphis. Thomas Leech returned to his former occupation as a cotton broker. On October 9, 1866, Charles H. Rigdon died in Greensboro. He was forty-three years old. History has provided no footnote or clue to the fate of Thomas Leech. After the war, he, like so many others, passed into the limbo of obscurity.

It is not known exactly how many pistols were produced by Rigdon and his different associates. One point is most clear, however, Rigdon used a continuous serial numbering system throughout his wartime manufacturing career. At each new location, the serial numbers picked up where production had stopped. A serial as high as 2359 has been recorded. One might make the assumption that approximately 2400 revolvers were manufactured. Because of certain apparent design changes, students of Confederate weapons usually assign the number 1500 as the dividing line between Leech and Rigdon production



The cased High Standard "Leech & Rigdon" Commemorative. Blued and polished steel.

and Rigdon and Ansley production.

All of the revolvers were patterned after the popular Colt '51 Navy in .36 caliber. They have iron frames and brass backstraps and trigger guards. The most obvious departure from the Colt design was the employment of the round rather than the full octagon barrel. After his partnership with Ansley, Rigdon also introduced the novel feature of twelve rather than six cylinder stops. (An idea he copied from a Manhattan Arms design.) Further changes were also introduced into the loading lever latch.

Because of the many variations in markings, the revolvers produced by Leech and Rigdon and Rigdon and Ansley present an exciting (and sometimes exasperating) challenge to the student of Civil War weapons. Some specimens bear only a serial number. Some bear a few initials. Many are more explicit in their markings: "Leech and Rigdon, Novelty Works C.S.A."; "Leech and Rigdon"; "Leech and Rigdon, C.S.A."; "C.H. Rigdon, Augusta, Ga."; and "Augusta, Ga. C.S.A."

As far as craftsmanship and technical skill are concerned, the revolvers produced by Charles Rigdon and his partners rank among the finest weapons produced by the Confederacy.

In their long tradition of excellence and superb craftsmanship, High Standard Sporting Firearms of Hamden, Connecticut, has announced that it will produce a limited number of Leech and Rigdon commemorative revolvers. This finely crafted piece will be an excellent complement to their Griswold and Gunnison commemorative revolver.

As with the Griswold and Gunnison, High Standard stresses that this superb commemorative is intended to be a special tribute to a tradition which started at the Rappahannock Forge and still exists in the American character.

Made with the finest craftsmanship from the best materials available, the High Standard Leech and Rigdon is an item which will be warmly welcomed by both the collecting and the shooting fraternities.

Arnold M. Chernoff