

The Gun That Won the West

by Russell Freedman



One winter afternoon in 1830 a sixteen-year-old seaman named Sam Colt stood gapping before the window of a gunshop in Calcutta, India. He leaned forward, peering at an old flintlock pistol on display in the window. It was the strangest gun he had ever seen.

The pistol, he learned, was the invention of an American gunsmith named Elisha Collier. It was unusual because it was designed to fire six times without reloading. Unfortunately, it was also complicated, difficult to handle, and unreliable. It took so long to load that it would never outshoot an ordinary weapon. Sometimes all six charges

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accidentally exploded at once, making the gun more dangerous to its owner than to its target. Furthermore, Collier's pistol was hopelessly out of date. Flintlock weapons, requiring loose gunpowder, were rapidly being replaced by those using the recently invented percussion caps, which exploded when hit by a gun's hammer.

Sam walked slowly back to his ship, speculating. The man who invented a percussion-cap repeating weapon that was both efficient and foolproof would probably earn himself a fortune.

Like most seamen, Sam spent his spare time sitting on deck whittling curios out of wood. One day he took a new block, sharpened his pocketknife, and began carving a model of a gun.

When Sam's ship finally dropped anchor in Boston harbor a year after sailing, his sea chest contained the completed wooden model of a revolver that would fire several times without reloading. At least, that is what Sam hoped it would do. There was only one way to be sure—hire an experienced gunsmith to make a steel model.

Eventually an experimental model, made by a Hartford gunsmith named Anson Chase, was ready for testing. Sam placed it in a vise, tied a long string to the trigger, stepped back, and pulled. A terrific explosion followed, and bits of metal hurtled through the air. When the smoke cleared, Sam glumly stepped forward to examine the shattered pieces of his gun. Just as he feared, the ignition spark had spread to the other chambers, causing all the ammunition to go off at once.

Sam returned to his drawing board and

Anson Chase went back to work, but again the results were disappointing. Sam redesigned again and Chase built a third model, but this time the gun wouldn't fire at all.

Sam's father had financed the experiments up till then, but as far as he was concerned this was the end. Maybe the revolver was a good idea, but it would cost hundreds—possibly thousands—to perfect.

Sam took a job at his father's silk mill, and spent all his savings to pay Anson Chase for additional experimental models. In the following months Chase managed to turn out a couple of revolvers that worked, but they were not the smoothly operating weapons Sam had envisioned. Obviously, producing an acceptable firearm would take a long time—and a great deal of money.

Surprisingly, Sam found his answer in the chemical laboratory at the mill. The chemist there had read about scientific experiments with nitrous oxide, better known as laughing gas, and had learned to make it. When inhaled, the gas produced a brief, harmless form of intoxication during which people exhibited extraordinary, often amusing, behavior.

It occurred to Sam that laughing gas offered an opportunity to make more money than he could earn at his job. All he had to do was introduce nitrous oxide to the villages and hamlets of New England, combining a serious scientific demonstration with an acceptable form of entertainment. In many parts of New England, frivolous entertainments were frowned upon as immoral. Laughing gas demonstrations, however, would be scientific and educational. If they

happened to be amusing at the same time, so much the better. Not even the staunchest Puritan could object to an entertainment with a serious educational purpose.

So Sam put together a portable laboratory and set off to tramp the country roads. Whenever he came to a settlement, he set up his equipment and waited for a curious crowd to gather. Then he gave a brief lecture on nitrous oxide ("one of the greatest scientific discoveries of our age") and mixed up a batch of the gas. A few courageous spectators filed up, anxious to sample this great scientific discovery. Their unpredictable antics delighted the crowds.

The combination of science and entertainment proved irresistible. Sam visited several towns a day, passing the hat after each performance. Within a couple of months he had accumulated enough money for more experimental gun models.

Soon Sam realized that he might be wasting his time appearing in small communities. Perhaps he could put his show on a more professional basis and make a lot more money in the larger cities. Billing himself as "doctor" and donning a black frock coat and tall stovepipe hat, he started with Boston, the most sophisticated city in the country. When he left there, his billfold was bulging and he was prepared to visit every major city in the country.

That is exactly what he did. For the next three years he visited most of America's twenty-four states, playing to packed houses wherever he went.

Sam didn't neglect his revolver during

his travels. He had hired the best gunsmith he could find, a Baltimore man named John Pearson, and he continued to work out improvements for his gun while traveling.

The Baltimore gunsmith was a conscientious craftsman, and within three years he had built several highly efficient revolvers. Early in 1835 Sam gave his last performance and headed for Washington to apply for formal patents.

Sam's patents, however, did not bring him the immediate fame and fortune he expected. Tradition-minded military men frowned upon Colt revolvers as too radical, and the public regarded the untried weapons with suspicion. Eleven years after receiving his patents, Sam described himself as "poor as a churchmouse."

But he didn't remain poor much longer, for early in 1846 the Mexican War began. General Zachary Taylor, in Texas, was one of the few army officers who recognized the superiority of the Colt revolver. He sent one of his aides East to find Sam Colt and buy as many of his guns as possible.

The Mexican War proved that nothing could compare with the six-shooter. From that time on, the Colt revolver was as integral a part of Western history as boots and saddles.

By 1855 Colt's factory was the largest private armory in the world, turning out repeating firearms ranging from miniature pocket pistols to high-powered rifles. Sam had finally made his fortune. When he died in 1862, at the age of forty-seven, he was one of the wealthiest men in America.

CHECK YOUR READING

- The most unusual feature of Collier's pistol was that it**
 - used no percussion caps
 - was quick and easy to load
 - fired six times without reloading
- Sam Colt's first model of his pistol was**
 - drawn on paper
 - carved from wood
 - hammered from copper
- Sam's first experimental gun exploded because**
 - the barrel was too small
 - he used too much powder
 - all the charges went off at once
- The first three experimental models were financed by**
 - Sam's father
 - Sam Colt
 - Anson Chase
- After inhaling nitrous oxide, people usually**
 - became ill
 - did funny things
 - slept for hours
- Puritanical people accepted Sam's laughing gas show because he emphasized that it was**
 - dangerous
 - amusing
 - scientific
- Sam moved his show to the big cities mainly because he wanted to**
 - educate more people
 - earn more money
 - see more of the country
- The Baltimore gunsmith worked on Sam's revolver for about**
 - three months
 - one year
 - three years
- The immediate reaction of most people to the new gun was one of**
 - enthusiasm
 - amusement
 - skepticism
- The six-shooter first became highly popular during the**
 - Mexican War
 - Civil War
 - Indian War

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