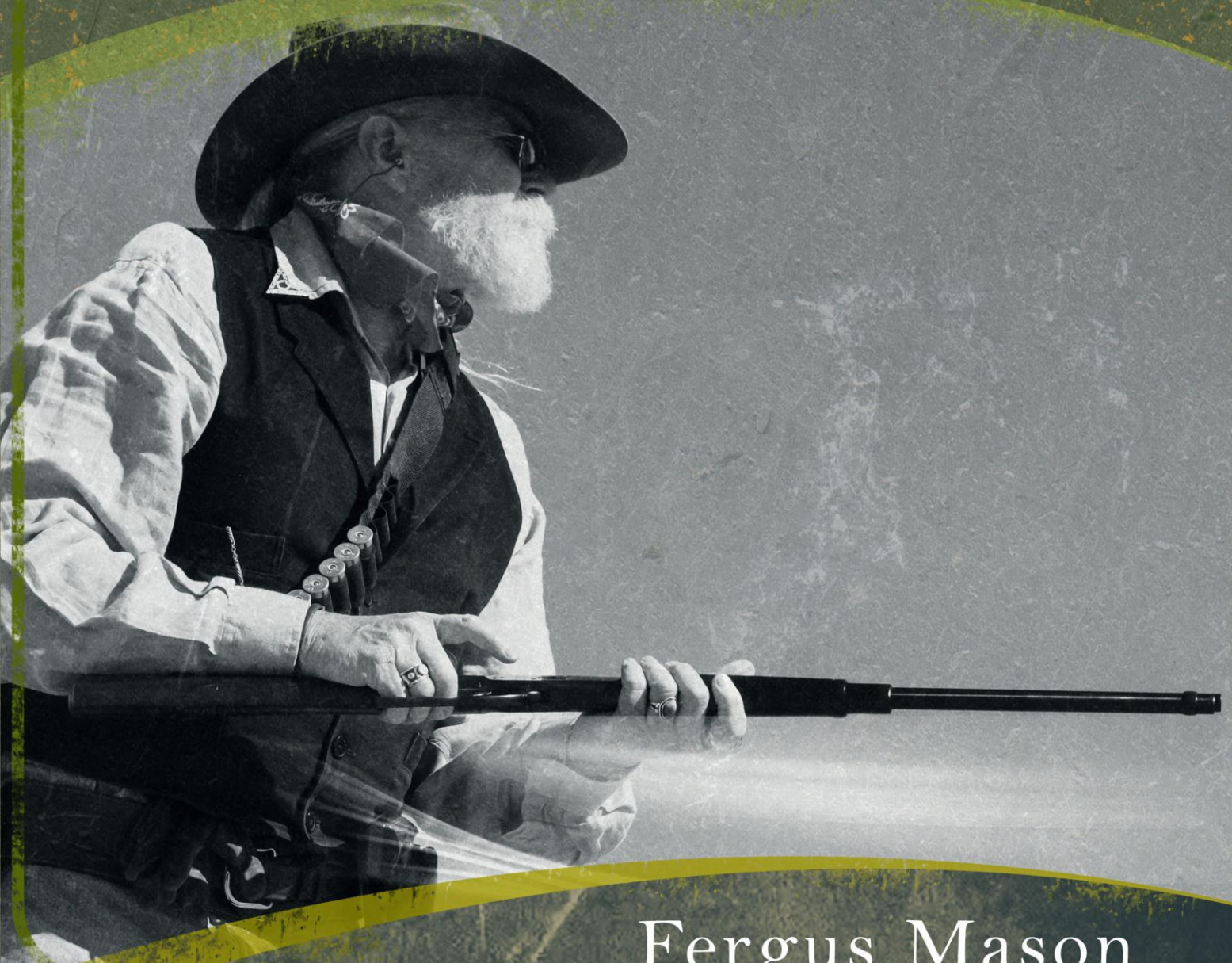


BEST SHTF GUNS  
FROM

THE OLD WEST



Fergus Mason



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### *Introduction*

No good Western movie is complete unless it showcases an array of classic firearms, and there are good reasons for that. If you ever want to understand why Americans have a different relationship with firearms than the rest of the world, you have to understand the Old West. It was guns that made the creation of the USA possible. Unarmed, our pioneer forefathers could never have tamed the wild lands they found as they moved inland from the original colonies. As they moved west they had to confront hostile tribes, dangerous animals and even outlaws; along the way they also had to hunt to survive. Without guns they'd never have made it.

Rightly, the guns that won the West have become American icons. Many of them are still being made, and they're popular collector's items. More than that, some of them have advocates that say they're still practical weapons today. How true is that?

The answer seems like it should be obvious. After all, these are old guns. Historians put the end of the Old West era at 1920, but the period most of us associate with it – and that gave us the most iconic guns – covers a couple of decades each side of the Civil War. That takes us back well over 100 years, and firearms have advanced a lot in that time. Can an antique gun *really* still be useful in a world of AR15s, Glocks and precision bolt-action rifles?

Yes, it definitely can. Part of that is that *any* gun is useful, if it's in working order and you have ammunition for it. The only gun that can't help you is one you don't have. More important than that, though, is that a lot of the guns of the Old West were just good guns. The pioneers were tough people in a tough environment, and they chose dependable weapons that wouldn't let them down. Their guns were simple, rugged and easy to maintain in harsh conditions. Many of them were designed by people who knew the West, so they were ideal for that environment.

A lot of the things that made those guns so vital in the Old West mean they're still good guns today. They might not have all the modern tactical features we're used to, but they won't let you down when you need them. In this book we'll look at nine of the guns that served our ancestors well, and still get the job done today.



# *Chapter 1*



# *Shotguns*

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



Let's start with one thing Hollywood has got very wrong about the Old West: Revolvers. In the movies just about everyone has a revolver strapped to their hip, and quite often a pair of them. This wasn't the reality. Guns were expensive back then; as a percentage of the average income they were a *lot* more expensive than they are now. Most people could only afford one gun, and they wanted the one they got to be as versatile as possible.

It's hard to think of anything more versatile than a shotgun. No other firearm can fire such a wide variety of loads. The average 12-gauge can be fed with ammunition ranging from rock salt, for deterring intruders, to a single massive projectile for bringing down heavy game. In between there's a whole range of shot sizes that will let you take anything from small birds to deer.

For the average family in the Old West a gun wasn't a combat weapon. It was a tool, essential for putting food on the table and protecting crops and livestock from animals. Of course, it helped if it made an effective weapon as well, because the West had its dangers. A shotgun is a perfect jack of all trades; it isn't excellent at *everything* you might want a gun to do, but it covers most of it pretty well.

Shotguns were everywhere in the Old West – and, unlike revolvers and lever-action rifles, they were around at the beginning of the period. Early shotguns were percussion-fired muzzle loaders; apart from being shorter and lighter they weren't much different from smoothbore muskets. Some were even made from cut-down military surplus muskets. Both single and double barrel models were available. Breech-loading shotguns appeared towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in England, and soon made it to the USA. They still had external hammers, but now these struck angled firing pins that hit the cap on each cartridge. Finally, the boxlock, with concealed self-cocking hammers, was invented – again in England – in 1875, and since then almost all single and double shotguns have used it. The boxlock is fast, simple and sturdy, and it quickly became popular in the West.

Modern pump shotguns hold more ammunition than a traditional double, but they're less reliable, heavier and more expensive. If you want a cheap but dependable gun that can handle almost any situation, a double shotgun is still the best option. It's light, easy to use, there isn't a lot to go wrong, and it will reliably fire the full range of shotgun ammunition.

Unfortunately, the gunmakers who made the shotguns used in the Old West have either disappeared long ago or switched to making pump guns or high-end doubles that cost as

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much as a new car. That isn't a lot of use if you want the maximum amount of gun for the smallest amount of money.

The solution is to get a modern gun that's equivalent to the ones used in the Old West, and there's a very obvious choice. The Russian Baikal brand, made by Kalashnikov Concern, are solid, dependable guns that won't win any prizes for beauty, but they work well – and they're cheap. Thanks to sanctions against Russia these guns aren't being imported anymore, but there are plenty used and new ones still on the market.

For most people, the Baikal MP 43 is a great choice. It's a 12-gauge side by side double, with a chrome-lined bore and 3-inch Magnum chambers that let it use any shotgun ammunition. It comes in several barrel lengths from 18 to 30 inches, too. Short barrels are lighter and handier at close quarters; long barrels give a tighter shot pattern and longer range. Although it's a very traditional gun it has modern removable choke tubes to make it even more versatile.

The MP 43 is a boxlock design, but if you want to get as close as possible to the shotguns of the Old West there's also the related MP 43K. Often called a "coach gun", this is basically identical to the MP 43 apart from the action. Instead of the boxlock there's an old-style lock with twin external hammers. This action is more complex than the boxlock and the hammers are exposed to being knocked, but it does give you the option of loading the gun then decocking it by lowering the hammers.



*Chapter 2*



*Remington New Model  
Army “Model 1858”*

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Made famous as the sidearm of Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef) in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, this elegant-looking revolver was a standard handgun of the Union Army during the Civil War. Close to a quarter of a million of them were made, and tens of thousands of them found their way out West.

For most people a handgun wasn't as useful as a shotgun, but they did have their strong points. If you could afford two guns it made sense to get a compact one that could be carried at all times. It was even better if that gun had a high ammunition capacity – and, in a world used to one-shot muzzle loaders, six shots was a lot of firepower. The new revolvers were also tough and reliable, and while they weren't much use for hunting they were excellent for self-defense.

The standard US Army revolver in the early 1860s was the Colt Army Model 1860, a .44 caliber percussion gun with a six-shot cylinder. Unfortunately, Colt were never able to meet the demand for this pistol, so the Army started buying Remington 1858s as a secondary issue. Then, in 1864, a huge fire completely destroyed Colt's factory and the Remington was ordered in large numbers.

The Remington was slightly bulkier and heavier than the Colt, and the government didn't like it because it cost 50 cents more (the equivalent of \$15 now). The soldiers who were issued the 1858 liked it, though. The Colt's frame had no top strap, and its strength relied on the lower frame and a massive cylinder pin; the Remington's cylinder fitted into a cutout in the solid frame, making it a much stronger design.

Like most revolvers at the time the Remington is what's now called single action – you have to cock the hammer between shots. This makes it a bit slower than what we call “double action”, where pulling the trigger recocks, then drops, the hammer. In fact, this is technically an Adams action, and double action originally meant a gun that could be fired this way *or* manually recocked between shots. The advantage of hand-cocking is that you get a much lighter trigger pull, which makes the pistol more accurate.

For modern shooters the Remington has one major drawback – it's a cap and ball design. You can get six shots off in a hurry, but reloading the cylinder takes a couple of minutes. The complicated process involved pouring a powder charge into each chamber, dropping a ball on top, then rotating the cylinder one chamber at a time and using the hinged lever under the barrel to ram the ball down on the charge. Finally, a cap had to be placed on each chamber's nipple.

This was becoming an issue even in the 1860s, and in 1868 Remington fixed it by making a drop-in replacement cylinder in .46 rimfire. This could be quickly removed and



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reloaded, or by milling a cut-out in the rear of the frame could be loaded while it was still in the gun.

Remington stopped making the New Model Army in 1875, moving on to more modern designs, but there are plenty modern reproductions available. Most of these are made in Italy, and the best come from Euroarms and Uberti – both of these are practically identical to the original, but use modern steel in the frames to make them even stronger. Again they're percussion guns, but replacement cylinders are available and let you fire low-pressure (non-Magnum) .44 cartridges. The Uberti is also available in the .45 Colt New Army Conversion model, with hinged loading gate and ejector.

The question is, why would you choose a 160-year-old design over a modern handgun? Let's just start with it being an excellent gun. It's strong, reliable and very accurate. These are long pistols, so they're not ideal for concealed carry, but that same length gives them a long sight radius. Even with a 6-inch barrel the 1858 is a very precise weapon, and the 8-inch model is even more accurate.

If you're firing .44 Special with a conversion cylinder the Remington is an effective, powerful weapon, and the .45 Colt is a legendary round. Cap and ball isn't bad either. In fact you can load a variety of bullet shapes in the percussion cylinder, but a ball is fine at short range.

There's a big advantage to the cap and ball design, too. As long as you have a supply of caps, which don't take up much space, you can make your own ammunition very easily. Black powder consists of sulfur and saltpeter (which you can find) and charcoal (which you can make). As long as you have a bullet mold any kind of lead can be melted down and turned into bullets. With some basic skills and tools, your Remington will keep reliably banging away long after modern guns have run out of ammunition for good.



# *Chapter 3*



# *Springfield Model 1861*

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The most used US Army rifle of the Civil War was a weapon that Revolutionary War soldiers would have recognized instantly as a more advanced version of the muskets they used. The Springfield Model 1861 Rifle Musket was a muzzle-loading black powder rifle that fired a .58-caliber Minié ball. Long, heavy and slow to load, it was also a sturdy and powerful weapon that was capable of impressive accuracy at normal combat ranges. After the war ended it served on with the US Army until the 1870s, but hundreds of thousands were sold as surplus. Many of these found their way to the western frontier.

A rifle made sense for the early settlers. In open country it was the only firearm with the range for hunting. The same long range was useful for keeping enemies at arm's length. Rifle muskets don't have the highest rate of fire, but with some practice most people could get off three or even four shots a minute. They were accurate out to around 400 yards, too, which is good performance for a muzzle loader with open sights. Best of all they were simple weapons; there weren't many moving parts to go wrong, and if anything did break it was easy to repair or replace.

By the 1870s cartridge rifles were starting to appear and the rifle musket was showing its age. The US Army converted most of its Springfields – the slightly updated Model 1863 – to Model 1873 trapdoor breech loaders, but out West most people were happy to leave them as muskets. The rate of fire was lower, but that was more important for soldiers than for trappers, hunters and farmers. The heavy .58 Minié ball was also more effective on large game than the .45 round the Model 1873 launched through its re-sleeved barrel.

Finally, brass-cased cartridges were expensive and it wasn't always easy to find the caliber you needed. The only weapon-specific ammunition component for the old weapons was the projectile; percussion caps and powder worked with any gun, and as long as you could buy the right size of ball – or if you had a bullet mold, which were supplied with most civilian guns anyway – you were in business.

The Springfield is a pretty typical rifle musket. It's a long weapon – very long, in fact; 56 inches overall, including a 40-inch barrel. Despite its size it isn't all that heavy, at a bit under ten pounds. It's extremely simple to operate. All you have to do is pour a measured charge of powder down the muzzle, then ram the projectile down on top of it. Next, raise the hammer to half cock, put a cap on the nipple, fully cock the hammer, aim and fire. If you don't plan to fire immediately it's possible to lower the hammer over the cap to hold it in place, but any impact on the hammer could detonate the cap and fire the rifle. If you want to carry the rifle loaded it's best not to fit the cap until you're about to fire.

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Apart from the hammer and trigger, the Springfield has no controls. The lock is simple and most of the internal parts can be manufactured by anyone with hand tools and basic metalworking skills. The foresight is fixed, and the rearsight has two folding leaves calibrated to 300 and 500 yards, plus a fixed battle sight calibrated for 100 yards.

So we have a single-shot rifle that's over four and a half feet long and takes about twenty seconds to reload. Is it any use? Yes, it is. If you need a rifle for hunting, this will bring down anything in North America. Best of all, though, it's almost indestructible – and, like a cap and ball revolver, you can make your own ammunition if it comes to it. As long as you have caps, black powder and projectiles can be made from scavenged-up materials. Although it was designed to fire Minié balls it will work fine with a round ball too; to maintain accuracy, wrap the ball in a greased patch of linen or thin leather before ramming it. You can even use a wad and shot to turn the Springfield into a very long shotgun.

Original Model 1861 Springfields are expensive now, but there are some very good reproductions on the market. Again they're mostly made in Italy; the Pedersoli is a good example. It's huge, slow and old-fashioned, but it's also fun to shoot and, most importantly, it's a simple gun that will last forever.



# *Chapter 4*



# *Winchester Model*

*1873*

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



Rifle muskets like the Springfield were powerful and accurate, but many frontiersmen wanted a smaller, lighter weapon with higher ammunition capacity, and they were willing to trade range and hitting power for it. Unfortunately the weapons technology of the time was a lot more basic than today, and while gunmakers had been trying to make a rapid-fire weapon for centuries none of them were really successful.

The USA had an early taste of the power of rapid-firing rifles during the War of Independence, when the British deployed the Experimental Rifle Corps at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. This unit was armed with the Ferguson rifle, an unusual breech-loading flintlock that could fire up to ten shots a minute and was deadly accurate at over 300 yards – terrifying firepower at a time when the standard infantry musket fired three shots a minute and struggled to hit a barn beyond 50 yards. Fortunately for the revolution the Experimental Rifle Corps only numbered about a hundred men, and it was disbanded after its commander (and the rifle’s designer), Major Patrick Ferguson, was wounded at Brandywine. Ferguson himself once had George Washington in the sights of his deadly rifle, but didn’t pull the trigger as he thought it was ungentlemanly to shoot a man in the back.

All but a handful of Ferguson rifles left America with the retreating British, but American gunsmiths wanted to replicate its firepower. Early efforts included long-barreled revolvers fitted with rifle stocks, but these were never very effective. It was only when the Sharps rifle appeared that the Ferguson could be matched, but the Sharps was still a single-shot breech loader. Gun designers wanted to do better.

The first really successful repeater was the 15-shot Henry rifle of 1860, used by Union cavalry during the Civil War – “That damned Yankee rifle that they load on Sunday then shoot all week.” After the war the basic design was improved by Winchester and quickly became popular on the frontier. The original Winchester was the .44 rimfire Model 1866, known as the Yellow Boy for its brass receiver. Then, in 1873, Winchester released a new centerfire cartridge, the .44-40 – and a new version of the rifle to fire it.

Centerfire rounds can be more powerful, because the weak spot of the rolled rim is eliminated, so to handle the increased power Winchester replaced the brass frame with a steel one. They also beefed up the rest of the gun and made a few refinements to the action, then released it as the Model 1873.

Everyone who’d been looking for a smaller, faster-shooting rifle suddenly had what they wanted. The Winchester didn’t have the power of the old rifle muskets, but it was still effective out to about 200 yards, and that was good enough for self-defense and most hunting.

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There was another big advantage to the Model 1873. The .44-40 was basically a pistol cartridge, and it wasn't long before handguns chambered for it started appearing. Colt released their famous Peacemaker in the new caliber as the Frontier Six-Shooter, and Smith & Wesson did the same with the New Model 3. That meant you could use the same ammunition in your rifle and handgun, which made life a lot easier.

In many ways the Model 1873 was the AR15 of its day. Lighter and more compact than traditional rifles, it offered a high magazine capacity of fifteen rounds and a good rate of fire – a Winchester could put more rounds down range than four or five men with rifle muskets. It came in a variety of barrel lengths, including 20-inch, 24-inch and several custom sizes down to 12-inch; the 20-inch was handy enough to be used from horseback. Meanwhile the .44-40 round was capable of bringing down a deer, and had more than enough punch for self-defense.

Winchester stopped making the rifle in 1923, after building about 720,000 of them. A few decades later Uberti started making high-quality replicas, and their popularity pushed Winchester to put it back into production.

There are two options if you want to own one of these guns. Winchester make the rifle in a single version, chambered for .357 Magnum and fitted with a ten-round magazine and 20-inch barrel. Uberti have a wider selection, with barrels from 24¼-inch down to a 16-inch “Trapper” model. They also offer it in .357, .45 Colt and the original .44-40. This means it's still easy to have a rifle and handgun that use the same effective cartridge.

Is it worth getting a Model 1873? Yes, definitely. It's a solid, reliable gun that's easy to shoot, accurate inside normal combat ranges, and very effective at taking a variety of game. It can't match the firepower of a semi-auto rifle, but it's still more than a match for any handgun. Overall it's a dependable firearm that played a huge role in the building of the West, and it will serve you well in the aftermath of a SHTF scenario.



# *Chapter 5*



# *Sharps Model 1874*



## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



We're used to general-purpose rifles that can effortlessly switch from close quarter battle to putting down reasonably accurate fire at five or six hundred yards. Firearms technology in the Old West couldn't produce that sort of weapon, which is why such different types as the Springfield and Winchester existed. Rifle muskets had decent range and high power, while lever-action repeaters could be fired a lot faster but chambered pistol cartridges. On the other hand, neither of them could achieve real accuracy at long ranges. Luckily there was another weapon that could easily achieve that – the Sharps rifle.

There's an old myth that the word "sharpshooter" originated from the accuracy of the Sharps rifle, but that's not true – it comes from an old German word, *Scharfschütze*, and the British had translated it into English before Christian Sharps was even born. The Sharps *was* a very accurate rifle by the standards of its time, though, and it's pretty respectable even today.

Sharps designed his first rifle in 1848; three years later he sold an improved design to R&L Co, who perfected it for mass production as the Model 1851. It was an unusual rifle for the time. The lever-operated action used a falling breech block, an immensely strong design that's now used in heavy artillery. It was fed with paper cartridges containing the bullet and powder charge. Opening the breech cocked the hammer and lowered the block, exposing the chamber so a cartridge could be loaded; when the breech was closed the sharp edge of the block sheared off the back of the cartridge, exposing the powder. At the same time the action advanced a paper roll of percussion caps, feeding a new one onto the nipple (standard copper caps could also be used).

Christian Sharps designed immense strength into his rifle for a reason; it was an extremely powerful weapon, firing a 475-grain, .52-caliber bullet at over 1,200 feet per second, which was high for the time; the Springfield managed around 950fps with a 500-grain bullet, and while many soldiers had complaints about the Springfield "It's not powerful enough" wasn't one of them – those huge, soft lead bullets were prodigious manstoppers. But, as powerful as the Springfield was, the Sharps topped its muzzle energy by over 60%.

The other outstanding feature of the Sharps was its accuracy. It was much shorter than a rifle musket – a 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch heavy octagonal barrel, and 47 inches overall – but, being a breech loader and fitted with excellent sights for the time, inherently a lot more accurate. In fact an expert marksman could put groups into a large dinner plate at 1,000 yards, and Sharps enthusiasts still shoot silhouette competitions out to 805 yards. A good Sharps is still competitive with a modern bolt action with open sights.

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It's also still a hard-hitting rifle. A muzzle energy of just over 1,500 foot pounds is about the same as a .223 carbine, but the big heavy bullet is devastatingly effective. After all it's a soft lead slug more than twice the weight of a .45ACP military ball round, and it's moving a lot faster. A Sharps will easily drop anything it hits – it was a favorite with professional buffalo hunters.

During the Civil War it was also a favorite with sharpshooters – the equivalent of snipers at the time. Sharpshooters had the job of picking off enemy officers and artillerymen, so that by the time the line infantry came into rifle musket range the enemy were already weakened and disorganized. The Sharps was ideal for this.

By the late 1860s the Sharps was becoming obsolete; its paper cartridges were less convenient, and more vulnerable to weather and rough handling, than the brass ones that were quickly taking over. That turned out not to be a problem, though. The falling block design as easy to adapt for the new ammunition – all that really had to be done was remove the cap feed system, replace the nipple with a slanted firing pin and rechamber the rifle to take a centerfire caliber. The update gave the rifle a new lease of life that kept it in production for another two decades.

The US Army started converting its Sharps rifles to .45-70 in 1873, and the next year a new civilian version was released. The Model 1874 came in a variety of calibers, including some of the most powerful black powder chamberings ever made – fearsome rounds like the .50-70 Government, which could deliver over 3,000 foot pounds to the target. That's a lot of power even today, and it made the Sharps more popular than ever as a big game rifle.

How well does the Sharps hold up today? Very well! It has all the power you need for hunting, plus a respectable rate of fire – with a bit of practice you can get off ten rounds a minute with a Model 1874. It's simple and robust. The action is very compact, making for a relatively short rifle relative to barrel length, and the working parts are very well sealed – the only place dirt can really get into is the chamber, and that's easy to clean. In short this is a rifle that will keep working very reliably even in extreme conditions, and it's rugged enough to last forever.

Original Sharps rifles are valuable antiques today, but there's no shortage of good reproductions available. As usual, Uberti of Italy are one source. Who knows why Italy makes so many reproduction Western guns, but they do and the quality is usually excellent. As far as the Model 1874 goes they have six versions, all in .47-70. These range from a Cavalry Carbine with a 22-inch barrel, through the 32-inch Buffalo Hunter to the 34-inch Deluxe.

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



There are a couple of excellent American options, too. C Sharp Arms, based in Montana, make reproductions of a range of classic Sharps models in a wide variety of historical calibers. These range from .30-40 Krag up to the mammoth .50-140 Sharps heavy game round. For SHTF use their Hartford Sporting Rifle in .45-70 with a 26-inch barrel is a great choice. Alternatively Shiloh Rifle Manufacturing also make high-quality Sharps rifles in a similar range of calibers.



*Chapter 6*



*Remington Model  
1875 Single Action  
Army*

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



We've already looked at the Remington Model 1858. This was a very successful revolver, especially when conversion cylinders for centerfire cartridges became available. The success of the conversions highlighted a problem, though – the standard cap-and-ball gun was becoming obsolete. When rivals like Colt started releasing pistols designed from the ground up to fire brass-cased ammo, Remington realized it was time to modernize.

Luckily for Remington, this wasn't a difficult process. The Model 1858 was a solid and well-proven design, and it didn't take a lot of work to produce a cartridge-fed version. The designers took the action and frame of the older gun, fitted it with a hinged loading gate and bored-through cylinder, added an ejector, and the Model 1875 was born.

The 1875 was identical to its predecessor in most ways. It retained the extremely strong frame design, with a solid piece of metal enclosing the cylinder top and bottom. This made it a lot more robust than open-top frames like most of the early Colts. The main changes were the loading gate and ejector. Many converted 1858s had these features added, but they were often quite crude. For example, the loading gate on a conversion was usually just a cutout on the right side of the frame that let you slide a cartridge into the chamber without removing the cylinder from the gun. The problem was that this left open space behind the chamber on the right; recoil could slide the round in that chamber backwards, and it would jam the cylinder when you tried to re-cock. A proper hinged gate closed the space and eliminated that risk.

Because the 1858 was a cap and ball design it didn't need an ejector; the chamber emptied when it was fired, and all you had to do was pull the fired caps off the nipples before reloading. With brass cartridges it was different; you needed some way to push the spent cases out the loading gate. A stick would do it, but a better solution was a spring-loaded plunger that operated an ejector rod. All you had to do was work the plunger, rotate the cylinder to the next chamber and work the plunger again – each time, a case would be ejected. Gunsmiths who converted 1858s often added an ejector, but Remington did a professional job of it. The rammer lever was fixed in position to act as a base, and a tube containing an ejector plunger and spring fitted to the right side of it.

Sadly for Remington they didn't quite make it on the timing. By the time the revolver was ready to go on sale Colt's Single Action Army had already been on the market for two years, and it had snapped up most of the big contracts. The biggest one of all was the US Army, which Remington had been hoping for a share of, but in the end the government only bought 650 pistols to arm the Indian Police. Mexico bought another thousand. Egypt ordered 10,000, but only a few were delivered – Remington had also

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



supplied the Egyptian government with rolling block rifles, but the bill hadn't been paid and the company decided not to take any more risks with them.

The Model 1875 might not have won lucrative government orders, but it did fairly well on the civilian market. It stayed on production for 14 years and Remington made close to 30,000 of them. During its life it was made in three calibers - .44 Remington, .44-40 and, finally, .45 Long Colt. All of these were solid, hard—hitting rounds, making the 1875 ideal for self-defense against either men or animals. A lot of pioneers carried one of these sturdy and accurate pistols as they built a new life in the West.

Carrying one today still makes a lot of sense. It can't deliver as much firepower as a modern semi-automatic, or even a modern revolver - it can't use speedloaders because of the solid frame design. To compensate for that there's a lot less to go wrong with it, and the long barrel makes it very accurate gun. You probably wouldn't want to carry one in combat, but if you're confident you can solve most problems with six well-aimed shots, and you want a gun that can stand any amount of hard use and keep working reliably, this is a solid choice.

Like most Old West guns the original manufacturer stopped making this one long ago. Also like most Old West guns, the Italian gun industry is making high-quality reproductions. Uberti make an almost perfect copy, which is exactly like the original apart from using modern steel. Marketed as the 1875 Army Outlaw, the Uberti gun is available with the standard 7½-inch barrel, as well as a handier 5½-inch version. You can choose two of the original chamberings, too - .44-40 or .45 Long Colt, as well as .45 ACP. The stronger steel used in the Uberti also allows higher pressure loads, so there's a .357 Magnum version too. The option of these more widely used calibers helps make the Model 1875 a versatile and practical post-SHTF handgun.



*Chapter 7*



*Remington Model 95  
Derringer*

## Best SHTF Guns from The Old West



Western-style revolvers look great, shoot well and last just about forever, but nobody's ever going to call them compact. Let's face it; if you're looking for a concealed carry pistol something like a Remington Model 1875 isn't ideal. Even with the "short" 5½-inch barrel it's almost eleven inches long, so it's not exactly a pocket pistol. So, what did our Western ancestors do when they needed a discreet firearm for self-defense? Simple: They carried a derringer.

The first popular, compact pistol made in the USA was designed by Henry Deringer in 1852. Deringer came from a family of gunsmiths – his father, Henry Senior, made many of the famous Kentucky Long Rifles used in the Revolutionary War – and Deringer himself opened a gunsmith's shop in 1806. He started off making flintlock rifle muskets for the US Army, then moved into high-quality sporting rifles and dueling pistols. In about 1825 he started experimenting with pocket pistols, and finally in 1852 he released the famous Philadelphia Deringer.

Although it was popular, this wasn't really much pistol. It was a single-shot, .41-caliber percussion muzzle loader, with a rifled barrel between 1.5 and six inches long. It took a fairly small powder charge, and was never going to win any prizes for range or power. What it *did* do was give people the option of carrying a very concealable gun that was effective enough at close range. Thousands were sold for self-defense and it also, notoriously, became a favorite of assassins. A Philadelphia Deringer was the gun used to assassinate President Lincoln in 1865.

Just a few years after Deringer released the little gun it was overtaken by technology, as brass-cased cartridges began to replace percussion weapons. It didn't take long before other gunmakers realized that, with the new ammunition, they could make a pistol that was even smaller than Deringer's and some extremely compact handguns started to appear. One of the best, and definitely the most recognizable, was Remington's Model 95.

At least, that's what Remington called it. However, "derringer" – the second R crept in quite quickly – soon became a generic term for a very small pistol, and the Model 95 is often called the double derringer. It was made from 1866 to 1935, and in the end Remington made over 130,000 of them. Tens of thousands were carried, and used, in the Old West.

Apart from its small size, Deringer's original gun was a pretty conventional percussion pistol. It didn't have any radical design features, just existing ones engineered down into a very compact form. The double derringer was different. It was a break-open design with two over and under barrels in .41 Short Rimfire caliber. Unusually, the



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barrels hinged upwards when a lever on the side of the frame was operated. A sliding extractor on the other side pushed spent cases out of the chambers.

There was no trigger guard; the trigger was concealed inside a spur on the frame, and moved forward into firing position when the external hammer was cocked. The firing pin was hinged; an unusual cross-shaped sear rocked it up or down each time the hammer was cocked, so on alternate shots it would strike a different chamber.

When it came right down to it the Remington Model 95 wasn't a lot of gun. The .41 rimfire was notoriously underpowered; sometimes a heavy overcoat would stop the bullet. It *was* a gun, though, and at the close ranges it was used it generally had enough punch to do the job. It was also very easy to conceal – it would fit in any pocket. Many of the buyers were women, because it could easily be carried in a purse, inside a muff or even tucked in a stocking top.

Remington haven't made the Model 95 for more than 80 years, but there are many modern reproductions of it and they're just as compact as the original. The really good news is that they're chambered in a huge array of modern calibers, most of them far more effective than the .41 rimfire. In fact, .22LR derringers are popular, and even that is probably more effective than the .41, but there's no shortage of tiny double pistols in .38 Special, 9mm and .357 Magnum. There are even a couple in .45 Long Colt. Bond Arms and Cobra are two companies who make powerful but ultra-compact derringers, some almost identical to the old Remington and others with refinements like safety catches and trigger guards.

Is it worth getting one? That depends on what you're looking for – but if you want the most concealable gun possible, the answer is a definite yes. You won't find any revolver or semi-automatic that comes close to being that small and flat, and derringers also have a respectable barrel length for their size; with 3-inch barrels you can still get a pistol less than five inches long.

Derringers are short-range guns; their small grips mean they're not that controllable and they usually have simple fixed, low-profile sights. They're surprisingly fast to reload, though, and even with what's in the chambers, two rounds of .357 that nobody expected you to have can make a big difference. If you take concealed carry seriously, one of these tiny equalizers should be on your shopping list.



# *Chapter 8*



# *Spencer 1860*

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We've already looked at the iconic Winchester Model 1873, the most famous repeating rifle of the Old West era – and maybe ever. It wasn't the only repeating rifle of the time, though, or even the first. The Winchester was a development of the Henry, but even that wasn't the first. In fact the first repeater to achieve widespread use was the much less famous Spencer 1860.

The Spencer was designed by Christopher Spencer around the same time as the Henry appeared, and competed with it for US government contracts. The Spencer won, and more than 200,000 of them were made between 1860 and 1869; many of them were issued to US Army units, especially cavalrymen, and they saw a lot of use during the Civil War. It was so highly thought of that the Confederacy, which captured many Spencers, re-issued them to their own troops despite the difficulty of getting ammunition for them.

Like the Henry and Winchester, the Spencer was a lever-action design. Unlike them, the tubular magazine wasn't under the barrel; it was in the rifle's butt. Operating the lever tilted the rear of the breech block down, ejecting the spent case and bringing the chamber into line with the magazine to feed a fresh round.

Most experts agree that the Spencer had two disadvantages compared to the Henry and Winchester. The first was the action. Working the Winchester's lever pulled back an operating rod that recocked the hammer; nothing else had to be done between shots. With the Spencer you have to pull the hammer to half-cock, work the lever then fully cock the hammer. That meant a lower rate of fire; while the Winchester could manage around 28 rounds per minute (although not very accurately) the Spencer was doing well to manage much more than 20. In practice, with properly aimed shots, it wasn't a significant difference, but the Henry did have a slight edge.

The other drawback was the magazine capacity. The Henry and Winchester generally held fifteen rounds; the Spencer was limited to seven. There were two reasons for that. The Henry's magazine ran the length of the barrel, which was 24 inches long; the Spencer's was in the much shorter butt. The other reason was that the Spencer fired a much larger cartridge.

Like the .44 Henry the Spencer fired a rimfire round, the .56-56 Spencer. The disadvantage of rimfires was that the rim itself was inherently weak, and using too powerful a load tended to badly damage the case and jam it in the breech. On the other hand they also tended to be more reliable than the early centerfire primers. People were more comfortable using them in tubular magazines, too. Early primers could be

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sensitive, and having cartridges stacked nose-to-primer in a tube that recoiled every time you pulled the trigger made shooters nervous.

Not all rimfires are equal, though, and the Spencer was a much more serious round than the .44 Henry. The Henry fired a 200-grain bullet at about 1,125fps, giving a muzzle energy of around 570 ft lb. The Spencer's 350-grain projectile hit 1,200fps, delivering 1,125 ft lb. It was also pretty accurate out to about 500 yards, while the Henry struggled at much over 200. Overall the Spencer was a much better rifle for hunting, and while it couldn't put down as much firepower in combat as the Henry or Winchester it did let you start winning the firefight at a much longer range.

There's no doubt that the Spencer had more of an impact on the Civil War than any other repeater, mainly because there were just more of them on the battlefield. While they were quite rare in the Army of the Potomac, in the US armies deployed further west whole regiments were armed with them. Those regiments often had a devastating effect; they could shoot as far and hit as hard as men armed with rifle muskets, while almost matching the lighter Henry's rate of fire. The Spencer's biggest victory was probably at the Battle of Nashville, when 9,000 Union mounted infantry armed with the rifles outflanked General Hood's army. Their attack was so powerful that Hood was forced to reinforce that flank, fatally weakening his main defensive positions – and in the end the left flank disintegrated anyway, quickly followed by the collapse and virtual destruction of Hood's Army of Tennessee as an effective force.

As a post-SHTF rifle the Spencer has the same advantages as most Old West guns. It's simple and incredibly robust; well-maintained, it will last pretty much forever. It's also powerful enough to hunt most game, and while it doesn't have the firepower of a semi-automatic it does outrange a short-barrel rifle. If your opponent has a pistol or shotgun, a Spencer has them totally outgunned.

Original Spencers are much too valuable to use as everyday guns, but Chiappa of Italy (where else?) make a high-quality reproduction in .56-50 centerfire or .45 Long Colt. It's available as a rifle with a 30-inch barrel, or a carbine with a 20 or 22-inch barrel. Paired with a good revolver in .45 Colt, it makes for a very capable loadout that will serve you well in a tough spot.



## *Chapter 9*



# *Colt Single Action Army*

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And finally we get to the gun that, more than any other, has come to symbolize the Old West. We've looked at a couple of excellent revolvers, and some long guns that had a much bigger influence on the period than Hollywood gives them credit for, but if you had to pick *one* gun to represent the history of America's pioneers it's almost certain to be this one – the Colt Single Action Army, better known as the Peacemaker or just the Colt .45.

Despite being the iconic gun of the West, the Colt appeared quite late in the period. Colt had developed the first really practical revolvers as early as 1851, and thousands of cap-and-ball Colt pistols made their way out to the frontier, but the appearance of metal cartridges made them all obsolete. Unfortunately for Colt, the bored-through cylinder required for a cartridge revolver had been patented by Rollin White in 1855; the next year he sold the patent to arch-rival Smith & Wesson in exchange for a royalty of 25 cents for each revolver they sold.

Ironically Rollin White (who also developed the knife-edge breech block for the first Sharps rifles) was a former Colt employee, and his prototypes were made from scrap cylinders he'd scavenged from the workshop. But the law was the law, and if Colt started making bored-through cylinders while the patent was valid they would have to pay Smith & Wesson every time they sold one. Instead of swallowing their pride, Colt decided to wait out the patent. It expired in 1869, and they immediately started work on a cartridge-loaded revolver.

What Colt finally came up with wasn't just one of the most recognizable revolvers of all time; it was also a highly effective gun. They started by designing a new cartridge for it, the legendary .45 Long Colt. Fractionally larger in diameter than the .44 rounds that most big-bore revolvers had used, it was also significantly more powerful.

Next, they came up with a pistol to match. At this point Colt decided to abandon the open-topped frame that most of their previous designs had used. There was nothing much wrong with earlier Colts, but by now it was obvious that the full-frame design favored by Remington was inherently stronger. For the Peacemaker, designed to fire one of the most powerful cartridges used in a pistol so far, a full frame was the only sensible choice. A hinged gate on the right of the frame opened to expose the back of the chamber at the 2 o'clock position. With the hammer at half-cock the cylinder unlocked from the mechanism, so it could be freely turned for faster loading.

The front of the frame held the barrel, with a spring-loaded ejector rod underneath and slightly offset to the right. That lined up with the right-hand chamber, so with the loading gate open an empty case could be pushed out. The original standard barrel was

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7½ inches long, and became known as the Cavalry model; 4¾ and 5½-inch models were also available.

At the back the strong and reliable lock had one unusual feature. In most revolvers the cylinder pawl was linked to the trigger; pulling the trigger raised the pawl, which engaged the cylinder and rotated it to bring the next chamber under the hammer. In the Peacemaker the pawl was linked to the *hammer*. It's not clear why Colt did that, but it wasn't long before people figured out they could do something unusual with it.

If you start with an uncocked Peacemaker, you can get off six shots very rapidly by pulling the trigger (it won't fire, because it isn't cocked) then "fanning" the hammer with the edge of the other hand. Some cowboy action shooters can draw and empty the gun in just over a second using this technique – faster than a semi-auto can fire – but for most people three shots a second is pretty good. Many believe that fanning the hammer is extremely inaccurate, but there are plenty videos on YouTube that prove different. With some practice it's possible to shoot tight groups, or rapidly engage multiple targets.

The Peacemaker's first big test was the US Army's pistol trial in 1872. The Army was looking for a new handgun to replace its 1860 cap-and-ball Colts, and they'd already bought a thousand .44 S&W Number 3 Schofields to evaluate. Colt made a thousand guns in the same .44 American chambering and entered them in the trial. It quickly became obvious that the Colt was superior, and the original .45 model was adopted as the standard US military pistol – a role it filled for the next 20 years.

With the Army order in the bag Colt quickly began selling the Peacemaker to civilians, in a range of calibers. As well as the .45 it could be chambered for the .44-40 (ideal for anyone who carried a Winchester rifle), .38-40, .38 Colt and many others. Huge numbers of them in both military and civilian hands helped tame the West, and it remained popular well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact Colt only stopped making it when the USA entered World War II, so they could concentrate on military orders. Even then, batches of Peacemakers in .38/200 British were sent to the UK to supplement production of Webley and Enfield revolvers.

After the War Colt had no plans to restart Peacemaker production, but public demand soon changed their mind. In 1956 they started making them again, and continued until 1974 when they dropped the gun again. This time it only took two years for them to give in and resume production; these "third generation" guns have some minor changes, but still look almost identical – and they're still being made.

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So, unlike most of the other guns we've looked at, there's no problem with getting your hands on an original Single Action Army. Colt sell it in all three original barrel lengths and a choice of .45 Colt or .357 Magnum, although other calibers are available through the Colt Custom Shop. As well as the Colt, Ruger's Vaquero is a near-clone of the Peacemaker but adds more barrel options and offers .44-40 as well as .357 and .45. Finally, there are Italian clones that mimic the Peacemaker almost perfectly; the Uberti Cattleman is a good example, and you can get it in .44 Magnum if .45 Long Colt isn't powerful enough for you.

All the guns we've talked about are still practical weapons that can have a place in a SHTF arsenal, but most of them have faded into history to some extent. The Peacemaker is different. It shares the title "The gun that won the West" with the Winchester Model 1873, and it's probably more popular today than it's ever been; hundreds of thousands of Americans shoot with them regularly. Part of that is because of its rich history, but it's also a reliable and effective revolver in its own right. It might lack the technology of a modern weapon, but it's rugged, powerful and about as American as a gun can get. It helped build this country once, and if the manure really does hit the ventilator, a lot of Colt Peacemakers will play their part in building it again.