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PETTENGILL'S REVOLVERS

Remembering the Civil War's only truly hammerless handguns



By T. LOGAN METESH

Countless revolver variations found their way into the hands of soldiers, both North and South, during the Civil War. From the diminutive Smith & Wesson Model 1 to the heavy-handed LeMat and everything in between, they all looked very similar to one another.

That's what makes the revolvers designed by Charles S. Pettengill so unique. In an era dominated by single-action revolvers with external hammers, the New-Haven-based inventor created a double-action revolver with an internal hammer. Sure, there were other double-action models available (like those patented by Starr in 1860), but none were what we would today call "hammerless."



In 1861, James W. Ripley (below left) ordered 5,000 Pettengill revolvers for the U.S. military.

Pettengill designed a few different variants. First, in the late 1850s, was the Pocket Model, a .31-caliber design of which just 425 were made across all three variations. Shortly thereafter, the Navy or Belt Model emerged, chambered in .34 caliber. Approximately 900 were made. Then came the most well-known variant: the Army Model. This larger model was chambered for .44-caliber balls and featured an unfluted, six-shot cylinder and a 7½-inch octagonal barrel. Coupled with an equally unique grip frame,

the resulting hammerless design made for a 3-pound revolver with no rival.

The production was equally unconventional. Mr. Pettengill secured the initial patent on July 22, 1856. Then, Charles Robitaille and Edward A. Raymond of Brooklyn received patents for improvements on the design on July 27, 1858. Their improvements streamlined the internal double-action mechanism by reducing the number of parts contained within and having the remaining parts pull double duty, thereby eliminating the hinged cylinder locking pin of Pettengill's design.

While all three men's names are found on the revolvers in one way or

another, none of them actually produced the guns. Instead, the firm of Rogers, Spencer & Company of Willowvale, New York, made the revolvers. Located not far from Utica, this company consisted of Amos Rogers, Julius Spencer, Lewis Laurance and George C. Tallman, but none of their names are to be found on the guns. However, it was Rogers' trip to see Secretary of War Simon Cameron on December 15, 1861, that resulted in Chief of Ordnance James W. Ripley ordering 5,000 Pettengill Army Model revolvers at \$20 apiece.

Rocky History

Unfortunately, the guns did not fare well in their initial contract sample tests. Like

Pettengill's Revolvers



Pettengill revolvers with crisp patent and inspector markings can fetch thousands of dollars.

cited by Daniel B. Wesson and John

many other blackpowder revolvers, they fouled quickly. This gummed up the inner workings and prevented them from cycling properly. With a single-action model, one might be able to overcome this cycling issue by exerting some elbow grease on the external hammer and forcing it to cycle. Because Pettengill's design had no external hammer, this was not an option. Once the action ceased up, the gun would have to be taken apart to clean it and get it running again.

Instead of cancelling the contract outright, more political wrangling saved it by reducing the number of guns requested from 5,000 to 2,000 in June of 1862. This allowed the firm to at least attempt to recoup some of the \$25,000 it spent in tooling to make the guns. The individual price remained at \$20, and they were delivered between October 1862 and January 1863, but the cycling issues were never resolved. As a result, more than 15 percent of the guns delivered were eventually rejected by U.S. government inspectors.

At least six different units were issued Pettengill guns, with the 3rd Michigan Cavalry receiving 500, or one-quarter of the entire contract production. Other units from

Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky and Missouri received the rest.

However, within a year of their delivery, almost all of the revolvers had been removed from service. The government held onto the subpar pistols for more than a decade before selling them as surplus at a tremendous loss. On October 25, 1876, the St. Louis Arsenal sold 196 Pettengills for \$1.75 each. In July 1882, the New York Arsenal sold another 525 for just 27 cents each.

All told, approximately 3,400 Pettengill Army Model revolvers were made. Once the contract was completed, production continued briefly for the commercial market, and the same tooling was used to make the Rogers & Spencer revolver. The firm reused the machinery and parts because it hadn't yet recouped all of the money it had initially spent to get the Pettengill revolvers into production.

The Rogers & Spencer revolver received a government contract for 5,000 guns in November 1864, but only 1,500 were produced before the war ended in April of

1865. None were ever issued to troops, and they faced the same fate as the Pettengill, as almost all of them were sold as surplus in 1901.

Lasting Legacy

Even though Pettengill's revolver failed to make a lasting impression, it is still important to the story of arms development. His hammerless design was a good idea, and would go on to be refined by other arms-makers. It was the spirit of his patent and the improvements by Robitaille and Raymond that contributed to the hammerless revolvers we have today.

The impact of Pettengill's patents has been far-reaching. Aspects of his safety and locking mechanisms have been

Moses Browning in subsequent patents in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and other citations have come as recently as the 1980s by Heckler & Koch.

More than a century and a half later, Pettengill's failure to launch has turned out to be a good thing for some people. Because so few were made and even fewer survive, they are highly sought after today by gun collectors. Standard guns made for the civilian market after fulfillment of the government contract can cost more than \$1,000. Guns found with military inspector markings on the grips and assorted metal parts are worth even more. The grips will be marked with "NW" for Nathaniel Whiting, one of many sub-inspectors

for arms contracts. His last initial is often found stamped twice on metal components and can sometimes be accompanied by a "P," which is the mark of another sub-inspector by the name of Giles Porter. It's not uncommon to see martial examples in fair condition selling for \$5,000 to \$10,000, and those in exceptionally good condition have gone for as much as \$20,000. ★

