

IMPORTANT AMERICANS IN FIREARMS HISTORY

By Chuck Hawks

First and most important are the inventors, designers, and manufacturers, without whom firearms would not exist. From the standpoint of having the most influence on American history, and the development of firearms world-wide, there is no question in my mind that the three most important Americans associated with guns are Sam Colt, Oliver Winchester, and John Browning.

Sam Colt was responsible for the invention of the modern revolving pistol, and founded Colt Firearms. He became one of the great industrialists of the 19th Century. Famous Colt firearms include the long line of Colt black powder revolvers, of which the illustrious 1851 Navy is perhaps most highly regarded; the 1873 Single Action Army (Peacemaker); the famous line of double action (police style) revolvers that culminated in the Python .357 Magnum (the finest of all American double action revolvers); and the U. S. Army's revolutionary Model 1911 semiautomatic pistol (designed by John Browning). Colt Industries is the prime contractor for the M-16, perhaps the most famous service rifle in the world today.

Oliver Winchester didn't invent the lever action rifle, but he developed it, and founded the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. He also became one of the notable industrialists of the 19th Century. Famous Winchester guns include the line of lever action rifles that started with the Model 1866 and is still going strong today. It was the Model 1873 lever action that earned the title "the gun that won the west." The Model 12 is perhaps the most highly regarded pump action shotgun ever made. The Model 70 bolt action rifle became known as "the rifleman's rifle." The Model 21 side-by-side is regarded by many experts as the best of all American double-barreled shotguns. The name "Winchester" is synonymous world-wide for long guns, just as the name "Colt" is for handguns.

John Browning was the greatest gun designer in history and the founder of Browning Arms. A few of his more notable designs include the Winchester 1885 High Wall single shot rifle, the Winchester Model 94 lever action rifle (the best selling civilian rifle of all time), the military BAR light machine gun (veteran of WW I, WW II, and Korea), the Colt

Model 1911 autoloading pistol, the Browning Hi-Power (P-35) autoloading pistol (the first "wonder 9"), the Auto-5 shotgun (the first successful autoloading shotgun), and the Superposed double-barrel shotgun (which popularized the type all over the world). All of the guns mentioned above, except the military BAR, are still in production today, an amazing tribute to the brilliance of their design.

The contributions of these three towering figures in the firearms field eclipses all others in both America and the world. They, and the companies they founded, are responsible for the development of virtually every important type of gun except the double-barreled shotgun and the bolt action rifle (both European in origin).

From the shooting standpoint, I will nominate three shooters whom I regard as arguably the best Americans in history with the rifle, pistol, and shotgun, respectively. And, I will also select the person I regard as the best all-around shooter.

Annie Oakley gets my nomination as the "Best Rifle Shooter," and also as "Best All-Around Shooter," as she was an outstanding shot with the shotgun and revolver as well as the rifle. She used all three in her famous shooting demonstrations. Annie used a Marlin lever action .22 rifle for much of her trick rifle shooting, very similar to the Model 39 still made today. Almost as famous in Europe as she is in America, where she was friends with many of the titled heads of state, Annie Oakley's feats with firearms are legendary. This small woman was a sensation in her day, and possibly the best rifle shot who ever lived. Annie Oakley, of course, was active before and after the turn of the 20th Century. A great deal has been written about her in newspapers, magazines, and books in both America and Europe.

The choice for "Best Handgunne Shooter" is the easiest selection of the three to make. Most authorities agree that the incomparable Ed McGivern was the best handgunner that ever lived. Some of his feats have never been duplicated, and his achievements have been recorded in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Using an ordinary Smith & Wesson double action revolver, he could break six simultaneously hand thrown clay pigeons (standard trap targets) in the air, before any of them could hit the ground. He once fired 5 shots in 2/5 of a second, a record that has never been broken. He was also a master of the single action revolver and the autoloading pistol, but preferred the double action (police style) revolver because he could operate it faster than the autoloading pistol operated itself! Ed McGivern wrote a book called *Fast and Fancy Revolver Shooting*, which tells exactly how he did what he did (no tricks, just superb

reflexes and years of intensive practice). Read his book and start practicing, and you, too, can be a fast and fancy revolver shooter! Ed was born in 1874, and wrote his famous book in 1938.

There have been so many champion American shotgunners, in so many different disciplines, that I feel it is impossible to choose just one "Best Shotgun Shooter." So I am going to nominate a current champion, Kim Rhode, the young woman who won the Gold Medal in the women's double trap event at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, to represent the plethora of great American shotgunners, past and present. Kim works hard with the NRA to promote the shooting sports and preserve our Second Amendment Rights, and more than anything else, she is a young woman of whom all Americans can be proud.