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Guns of the Texas Rangers: The Walker Colt

by David Stroud

The greatest prize for Colt collectors is the renowned Walker, the legendary revolver that got Sam Colt back into the gun business and also provided a powerful weapon for Texas Rangers and U.S. Dragoons

during the Mexican War.

Colt's Patent Arms Manufacturing Company in Paterson, New Jersey, suffered bankruptcy in 1842 because the firm was unable to secure a government contract for Colt's Paterson five-shot revolver. But Sam never gave up, and though he was not manufacturing weapons in 1846, he had several improvements in mind for his revolver. All he needed was the treasured government order, and the war with Mexico could open the door to the wealth he believed he would someday enjoy. With that in mind, he wrote to former Texas Ranger Samuel H. Walker, who was recently commissioned a captain in the United States Mounted Rifles and was in his home state of Maryland recruiting his company.

In the summer of 1846 Colt, the would-be arms maker, wrote Walker that he had several improvements in mind for a new revolver and requested the former Texas Ranger's help in winning a government contract.

Captain Walker wanted his men equipped with Colt's revolvers. He had used them in Florida against the Seminoles and in Texas against Comanches, and he wanted Colts when he rode against the Mexicans. He returned a letter to Colt telling of the "Hays Fight" in 1844 when fifteen Rangers defeated a Comanche war party of 80 warriors, "killing & wounding about half of them." Walker added, "With improvements I think they (the revolvers) can be rendered the most perfect weapon in the world. . . ."

The two men got together on December 2, 1846, and designed a pistol based on the Paterson, but greatly improved. The new weapon proved to be more powerful than most modern-day revolvers.

The Whitneyville Walker, also known as the "Model of 1847 Army Pistol," measured 15 1/2 inches in length with a 9-inch barrel that was part round, and part octagonal. The square-backed trigger guard was brass and the ramrod had a hinged lever held in place by a spring clamp. The grips were one-piece walnut with an iron backstrap; the sights consisted of one located on a blade near the end of the barrel and one notched in the hammer.

Colt hired W. L. Ormsby, a renowned New York engraver, to design the cylinder scene suggested by Captain Walker: the famous "Hays fight." Because Ormsby had never seen a Texas Ranger, he placed them in the uniforms of the United States Dragoons. The cylinder was additionally marked "COLT'S PATENT U.S.M.R.," and the flat top of the breech was marked "ADDRESS. SAM^L COLT NEW-YORK CITY."

Additional markings consisted of a company letter (A, B, C, D, or E) paired with a number (1-47). Walker instructed Colt that the first revolvers were to be marked C, which was his company, and the others were to be stamped alphabetically.

The weight of the hand cannon was a massive 4 pounds, 9 ounces, and the .44 caliber cylinders held 50 grains of black powder that fired a conical bullet of 220 grains. The pistol in 1846 was "as effective as a common rifle at one hundred yards, and superior to a musket even at two hundred."

Colt received a contract for 1,000 revolvers on January 4, 1847, and would be paid \$25 for each arm. He would also receive an additional \$3 for powder flasks and spare parts.

Colt had everything he needed except an armory. He called on Eli Whitney, Jr., son of the inventor of the cotton gin, who was producing rifles for the government in Whitneyville, Connecticut. Whitney agreed to cooperate with Colt on the manufacturing of the Walkers "for certain considerations."

Colt not only fulfilled his contract but also built another 100 pistols for presentation to important people and for sale to civilians.

The Whitneyville-Walker revolver (U.S. Model 1847) was the first repeating pistol purchased by the Army Ordnance Department. Other contracts followed and Sam Colt continued to improve his product as the Walker evolved into the Dragoon, and then that arm gave way to the 1860 Army weapon.

Nevertheless, the massive Walker, used by Texas Rangers and regular soldiers, shall forever stand alone as a Colt treasure. Today only 168 are known to exist and their value can exceed \$100,000. Collectors, therefore, must heed the warning Sam Colt repeated until his death in 1862: "BEWARE OF COUNTERFEITS."

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David Stroud was born in Tyler, Texas, and graduated from Henderson (Texas) High School in 1963. He then enlisted in the Marines and in the following years served a tour in Vietnam and two years as a drill instructor at Parris Island, South Carolina. He earned his B.S. and M.A. degrees in history at Stephen F. Austin State University and is now a history instructor at Kilgore (Texas) College. He has written seven books along with fifteen articles and book reviews.

