

Performance Art

**THE BEAUTIFUL NAVY ARMS RENDITION
OF “THE GUN THAT WON THE WEST”
IS ALSO A GREAT SHOOTER**

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY STEVEN BARLOW

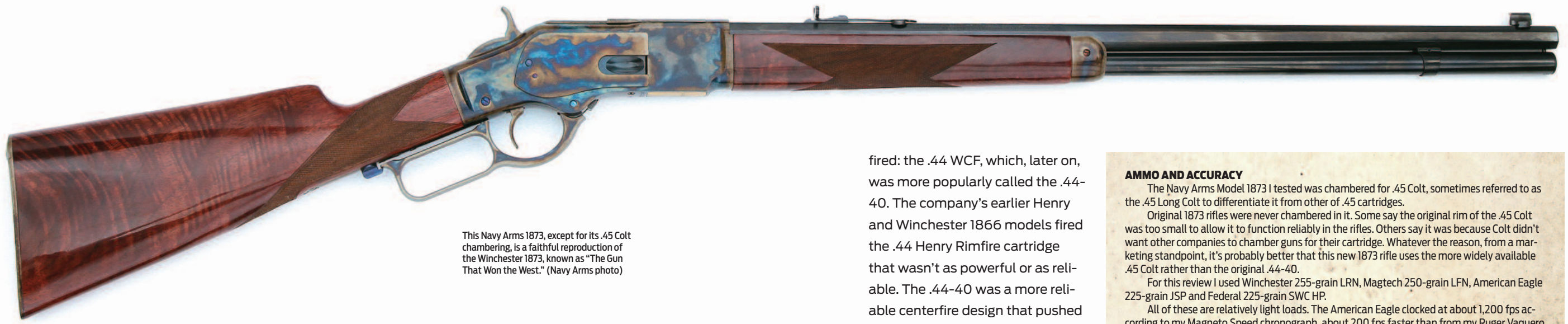
“It’s beautiful.”

That was the consensus of everyone I allowed to handle the rifle before I quickly and carefully took it back. I didn’t want to scratch it.

The rifle, marketed by Navy Arms, started its existence as a newly produced Winchester 1873 in .45 Colt, actually made by Miroku Firearms, which was then treated to a Turnbull color case hardened finish.



PHOTO CREDIT: STEVEN PAUL BARLOW



This Navy Arms 1873, except for its .45 Colt chambering, is a faithful reproduction of the Winchester 1873, known as “The Gun That Won the West.” (Navy Arms photo)

“To be able to daydream about how this gun was used in the Old West is just a bonus.”

When the Winchester 1873 was first introduced, it was a milestone in reliability and durability for repeating firearms. It would have been a treasured possession by anyone in the Old West who owned one, more for its ability to take down game, enforce the law and defend the homestead than for the way it looked.

The fact that I was nervous about marring the finish or scratching the stock was because this rifle was a loaner from Navy Arms and I was responsible for it. I shouldn’t have been so tentative, so protective of it at first. After all, this wasn’t an original, collectible 1873 worth thousands. It was a beautiful rifle, yes, but it was a beautiful rifle that was meant to be used. It was meant to be fired.

“It’s beautiful,” was my exact thought when I did fire it for the first time. The gun shoots like a dream. It comes to the shoulder effortlessly and points naturally. Because it fires a pistol cartridge, it



Loading .45 Colt rounds into the tube magazine through this loading gate in the receiver was easily accomplished without it nipping at your thumb. (Author photo)

has very mild recoil, which makes shooting it a very pleasant experience.

Of course, all of those things helped to make it an instant success among those straight-shooting, plain-talking settlers in the Old West. They were knowledgeable

and experienced with firearms, and they recognized a good thing when they saw it.

BACK IN 1873

When the Winchester 1873 was introduced, one of the biggest improvements was the cartridge it

fired: the .44 WCF, which, later on, was more popularly called the .44-40. The company’s earlier Henry and Winchester 1866 models fired the .44 Henry Rimfire cartridge that wasn’t as powerful or as reliable. The .44-40 was a more reliable centerfire design that pushed a 200-grain bullet to about 1,250 feet per second.

The rifle/cartridge combination caught on quickly, and soon Colt, Smith & Wesson, Remington and others were chambering their revolvers to fire this cartridge. This only added to the 1873 rifle’s popularity, as those who carried firearms could carry rifles and pistols that fired the same ammo. The 1873 was also chambered in .32-20 and .38-40. Pistols were made for these cartridges as well.

With the 1873 established, Winchester turned its attention to rifles firing longer, more powerful cartridges that had previously been the domain of single shot ri-

AMMO AND ACCURACY

The Navy Arms Model 1873 I tested was chambered for .45 Colt, sometimes referred to as the .45 Long Colt to differentiate it from other of .45 cartridges.

Original 1873 rifles were never chambered in it. Some say the original rim of the .45 Colt was too small to allow it to function reliably in the rifles. Others say it was because Colt didn’t want other companies to chamber guns for their cartridge. Whatever the reason, from a marketing standpoint, it’s probably better that this new 1873 rifle uses the more widely available .45 Colt rather than the original .44-40.

For this review I used Winchester 255-grain LRN, Magtech 250-grain LFN, American Eagle 225-grain JSP and Federal 225-grain SWC HP.

All of these are relatively light loads. The American Eagle clocked at about 1,200 fps according to my Magneto Speed chronograph, about 200 fps faster than from my Ruger Vaquero handgun. Cowboy action shooters don’t care about velocity, and a heavy bullet traveling at modest velocities is plenty for deer-sized game at 100 yards.

Though this wasn’t designed as a precision rifle, accuracy was very good. Using the iron sights exclusively, groups at 50 yards hovered around 1½ inches. Shooting off-hand at ranges out to 50 yards, most holes in the targets could be covered by your fist. I had no problems hitting a 10-inch steel plate at 100 yards.

fles. They produced the heavier-framed Models 1876 (.45-75, .50-95 Express and others) and 1886 (.45-70, .50-110 and others) for big game hunting.

But the handier 1873, with its moderate cartridges, continued to be popular. To this day, it is referred to as “the gun that won the West.” Later, Winchester introduced the stronger, John Browning-designed Model 1892, which fired the same short cartridges, and the Model

1894 that fired the smokeless .30-30 cartridge. These two rifles eventually eclipsed the 1873 in popularity.

In all, Winchester manufactured more than 720,000 of their 1873 rifles between 1873 and 1919.

1873 FEATURES

The Navy Arms rendering of this famous gun is offered with a full octagon barrel in lengths of 20 or 24¼ inches. The stock is



The Navy Arms 1873 started its existence as an unfinished Winchester 1873 made by Miroku Firearms Manufacturing Co. (Navy Arms photo)



Mark Bender, a colleague from the author's law enforcement days, had little experience with Old West weapons, but found that shooting mild pistol cartridges from a carbine was an enjoyable experience. (Author photo)

straight—no pistol grip—and is of deluxe grade, fully checkered American walnut. It has a full-length magazine tube with a 10-round capacity. It is available chambered in either .45 Colt or .357 Magnum.

Winchester's short-throw lever requires very little motion to chamber and eject the short pistol cartridges. Just as with the originals, there is a lever lock that can be twisted to lock the lever in place—great when you're bouncing along with it at a full gallop through brush.

The front sight is a brass bead. The rear is a semi-buckhorn that is adjustable for elevation and drift adjustable for windage. A dust cover slides over ejection port on the top of the receiver to keep debris out of the action. It moves out of the way automatically when the lever is worked.

There is a half-cock notch for the hammer, which is where it

should be when the rifle is carried in the field. There is no other manual safety. The metal butt plate is a slightly curved shotgun-style design that I find more comfortable than the crescent butt plates on many rifles of this era.

AT THE RANGE

The rifle I tested had the shorter, carbine-length 20-inch barrel. Its fast-handling qualities that helped to make it popular in the Old West were immediately evident. It was quick to transition from target to target, which would have helped the cowboy fending off a band of rustlers or the outnumbered lawman tracking a gang of outlaws. Those things go through your mind when you shoot a gun like this.

There was considerable take-up on the trigger, but then it broke cleanly with a respectable 4½-pound pull. I shot a couple of .45 Colt cowboy loads, one brand of

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jacketed softpoints and one brand of lead hollowpoints through the rifle and had no malfunctions after several hundred rounds fired. That would have been reassuring to any adventurer in the Old West whose life might have depended on his rifle's reliability.

The action on this Navy Arms gun was smooth; there were no rough spots whatsoever. Keep in mind, though, that lever action ri-

SPECIFICATIONS

Name: NAVY ARMS 1873

Base rifle: Current production 1873 rifle made by Miroku for Winchester

Calibers: .45 Colt, .357 Magnum

Finish: Turnbull color case hardened receiver

Barrel: Full octagon, 20- or 24¼- inches

Capacity: 10 in full-length tube magazine

Sights: Marbles semi-buckhorn rear, gold bead front

Stock: Deluxe American walnut with full checkering and Winchester Red finish, steel shotgun-style butt plate

Other: Winchester short-stroke kit pre-installed

MSRP: \$2,500



A close look at the Navy Arms 1873 receiver shows the quality of the gun's Turnbull color case hardening treatment. (Navy Arms photo)

fles, like pump action shotguns, work best when you don't baby the actions. Work the lever completely with authority and you will have no problems.

I spent little time at the bench with this rifle, just enough to get some chronograph readings and to see how the sights were regulated. Accuracy was good, certainly good enough for whatever use you make of this rifle within the limitations of its pistol cartridge.

A GUN FOR ALL SEASONS

I understand how this Navy Arms Model 1873 would be attractive to those involved in SASS cowboy action shooting events. Those shooters, in their reproduction Sunday-go-to-meeting best, would feel proud to be carrying this rifle into competition.

But I don't see this as a weekend-only rifle. I see it also as a perfect moderate-range hunting rifle to be carried by those who have reached a stage where they have earned a right to some of the finer things in life. To be able to daydream about how this gun was used in the Old West is just a bonus.

I would like to take this into the woods this fall. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it's true. And I'd like to be holding this beauty and use it for its originally designed purpose: to shoot it. And that would be a beautiful thing.

GNSL

SOURCES

Navy Arms
www.navyarms.com

OLD WESTERN SCROUNGER
www.ows-ammo.com

AVAILABILITY

Navy Arms sells their firearms through distributors exclusively. Your firearms dealer can track down one of these 1873 rifles through the following distributors: Ellett Brothers: 800-845-3711 Lipsey's: 225-755-1333 Jerry's Sports Center: 800-234-2612 Zanders: 800-851-4373

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