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Colt's Lightning

by David Stroud



I began collecting Colt and Remington revolvers in 1968 while attending Stephen F. Austin as a history major. I was on the GI Bill. By saving

change from the \$138 monthly check, I was able to attend the twice-yearly Houston Gun Show and purchase a '60 Army, '51 Navy, or '61 Navy in reasonably good condition. As an enthusiast of antique weapons ranging from flintlocks to cartridges, I often examined Colt Lightnings as historical artifacts of the American West.

One weekend, I was examining several Lightnings. The dealer, whom I considered much more knowledgeable than I, offered the advice to stick with the slightly more expensive but much more desirable Civil War Colts and Peacemakers. "Lightnings," he added, "are like pocket models, conversions, and turn-of-the-century guns. They'll never command the attention required to increase in price. They are bad investments." He pointed to one of the guns. "If you have just have to own one, you'd better get that one. It's one of the few that still works."

I listened and then carefully placed the old double-action back on the dealer's blanketed display, and happily purchased the larger framed '51 Navy or '60 Army instead.

Now, please don't misunderstand. I was buying nice Civil War Colts for less than \$200 while passing up better conditioned \$80 to \$100 Lightnings.¹

Those days are gone forever. Those \$80 ugly ducklings have grown into \$800 swans and joined their big brothers, the famous Peacemakers, as rightful partners in taming the Wild West.



Peacemaker (top) & Lightening (Bottom)

In January 1877, Colt introduced the smaller revolver to the gun-buying public as the "New Double Action Self-Cocking Central Fire Six Shot Revolver." For obvious reasons, that more-than-a-mouthful product name was soon



changed to the "Lightning Model," which is easier to say and offers more marketability by suggesting its "lightning-like" action.

Although the self-cocking revolver was considered public domain by that time, in 1881, William Mason was eventually awarded three patents relating to the Lightning's internal parts. He thereby was credited as being the designer of Colt's first double action.

The Lightning was originally manufactured in .38 caliber only, with barrel lengths of 1½" to 6" without ejectors and 4½" to 10" with ejectors. Later that year, a .41 caliber was added to the production line and became known as the

Thunderer.² Both models bear hard-rubber, bird's-eye grips and barrels marked, "Colt's Pt. F. A. Mfg. Co., Hartford, Ct., U.S.A. Colt D.A. 38. (or .41)." The left side of the case-hardened frame is stamped, "Pat. Sept. 19, '71. Sept.

15, '74. Jan. 19, '75,"³ and the trigger guard has either ".38 Cal." or ".41 Cal." The weapon was awarded its own serial-number range. Despite its malfunctioning reputation, 166,849 of these guns were produced before the revolver was discontinued in 1909.



With a Colt weapon, there is always more to any model than meets the glancing eye because of personal customization. The first double-actions were no exception. The weapon could be purchased with blue or nickel finish; various barrel lengths; with or without ejectors; and hand-etched, plain, or carved ivory grips. After the Second World War, a collector would need to acquire approximately 151 revolvers to own one of each variation. Even then, he would probably hear of at least one or two examples that he missed.

Inferior quality is often given as the reason so many non-working Lightnings exist. The truth may be that that the weapon was designed to work as a double-action only, and gunman, long accustomed to the single-action, caused the weapon's malfunction.⁴



It is frustrating trying to locate a working model Lightning. It is also exasperating trying to document Lightnings and Thunderers actually used by Texas Rangers, lawmen, and outlaws. However, there are a couple of notable exceptions.

John Wesley Hardin once used a Lightning to reclaim his losses in an El Paso poker game. He was also carrying his nickel-plated, ivory-gripped Thunderer as a backup weapon when John Selman killed him. Hardin apparently liked Colt's double-actions and purchased an engraved, nickel-plated, pearl-gripped Thunderer #73728 from George Lock. He then had to surrender it to William J. Ten Eyck "for displaying the same at the Gem Saloon."⁵ James "Killing Jim" Miller, one-time Texas Ranger, full-time gunman, and killer of Pat Garrett, gave Hardin, who was his cousin, a pearl-gripped, 2½-barreled Lightning with the back strap inscribed, "J.B.M. TO J.W.H."⁶

While he was customs collector, Patrick "Pat" Floyd Garrett's El Paso friends

presented him with an engraved Thunderer. It was gold-finished over nickel-plating and had German silver grips.⁷

Thomas Speers, of Kansas City, Kansas, was presented a nickel-plated, 4½"-barreled Thunderer with the back strap inscribed, "Thomas Speers, Chief of Police, from the Force 1882." Speers had been marshal of Kansas City from 1870 to 1874 and chief of police from 1874 to 1893.⁸

Henry "Billy the Kid" McCarty, a.k.a. William Bonney, Henry Antrim, Kid Antrim, and William Antrim, was believed to have used a Lightning or Thunderer because of the famed photograph of him holding a Model 1873 Winchester. The photo caused many to not only believe the Kid was left-handed (photo is reversed), but also that the holstered Colt single-action was one of Colt's double-actions.

Lightnings and Thunderers are at long last recognized as legitimate Wild West handguns. During their production, the frontier witnessed no less than 387 recorded gunfights, and Lightnings and Thunderers added double-action clouds of gunsmoke to our colorful history.

David Stroud was born in Tyler, Texas, and graduated from Henderson (Texas) High School in 1963. He enlisted in the Marines the following year and 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 a history instructor at Kilgore (Texas) College. He has written seven books, along with fifteen articles and book reviews.



Notes

1 These are relative prices. Many Lightnings were found as low as \$50 while some now are in the several-thousand-dollar price range. This depends on condition, engraving, and historical provenance.

2 The term "Lightning" is proper for both the .38 and .41. In fact, Belden and Haven's outstanding history of Colt revolvers never used the word "Thunderer."

3 These dates refer to three patents Mason already had.

4 This often-heard explanation has been confirmed by three antique gunsmiths.

5 Hardin's engraved Thunderer sold on June 3, 2002, for \$100,000.

6 The inscribed Lightning realized \$168,000 on June 3, 2002.

7 Pat Garrett's Thunderer did not appear on the "prices realized" sheet. However, the estimated range was \$100,000-\$150,000.

8 Thomas Speers' Thunderer was estimated to bring \$7,000-10,000 in April, 1995.

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