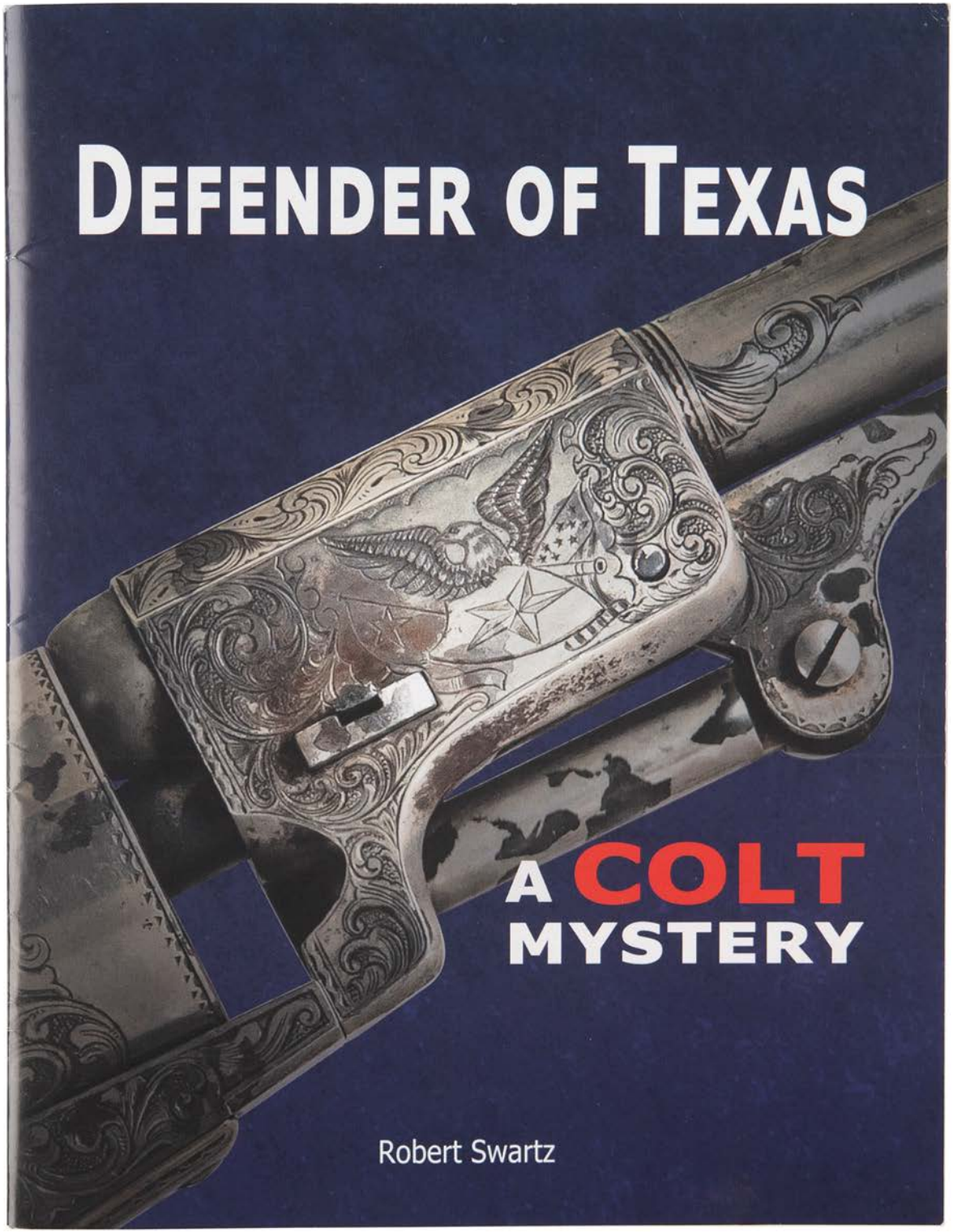
DEFENDER OF TEXAS



A COLT MYSTERY

Robert Swartz

About the Author.

Bob Swartz was born and raised in Los Angeles at a time when native Angelenos were rare. After graduating from UCLA with a B.S. and M.S. in finance, he was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in the army. In Vietnam he commanded the 221st Signal Company (Combat Photo and Mopic) that created a photographic archive of the war.

After a stint in Israel, Bob graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced his profession in Houston and Los Angeles. Long after retiring, he became fascinated with Texas history, Sam Colt, his firearms, and the development of firearms in the 19th century. His interest was particularly piqued by the most dismissed firearm Colt's ever produced, the Colt Open Top .22. He forsook all interest in golf and bridge.

The history of firearms, like the law, is a seamless web. His study of the Open Top .22 proved to be the key that unlocked many a mystery, particularly how it was that a worthless 1855 patent for a gun that was never produced became the most valuable patent of its day.

That particular episode was the core of Bob's highly-acclaimed *Colt-Smith & Wesson: A Clash of Arms* (2019). While working on that piece, he produced a number of published articles, including: *The Colt Armory Fire of 1864-Destruction and Deception, a New Understanding* (The Rampant Colt, Spring 2014, and winner of that year's Best Article); *The Colt Open Top .22* (Man at Arms, June 2016); *Breaking into Breech-Loading–Tracking the Colt Berdan 3-16* (Texas Gun Collector, Spring 2017), and *The Gun of Pease* (Texas Gun Collector, Fall 2018).

Bob lives in San Antonio with his wife of thirty-five years, Grace Labatt, a fifth-generation Texan. He has nothing but boundless gratitude for her support. She has critiqued, edited, and proofed, all he has produced. Above all, he values her limitless indulgence.

DEFENDER OF TEXAS
Colt 2nd Model Dragoon, 9343
The Real Deal or a Colt Mystery?

You be the judge.

Plus:

The Evolution of Sam Colt's presentations to John C. Hays and Ben McCulloch

MISSING: Fifty Fabulous Colts-Collectors on the Hunt

Robert Swartz

Texas and Mexico 1844-1848

Sam Colt, the greatest firearms maker the world has known, credited Texas Rangers for much of his success; John Coffee Hays first among them.[1] In 1844, Hays as captain of Rangers in San Antonio, proved the value of Colt's arms in frontier warfare against Comanches. That did not help Colt; his business collapsed in 1842.

In 1846, Texas Ranger companies volunteered for the Mexican War and took with them the few hundred Colt revolvers they had. Their first significant engagement, the Battle of Monterrey, made clear that against the Mexicans the Rangers needed more and more powerful Colts.

Now-Colonel Hays dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Sam Walker to Washington to pry loose from Army Ordnance the few Colts left over from the Second Seminole War.

On learning that Walker was in the Capitol, Colt wrote to him and soon they were working on a potent new gun that could bring down the horse of a charging Mexican lancer at one hundred yards. A beast—it weighed four and one half pounds—we know it today as the .44 caliber Colt Walker.

Walker and the Texas senators, Sam Houston and Thomas Rush, badgered and bullied until the government ordered one thousand Colt Walkers for the Rangers' use in Mexico.

Walker, Hays, indeed all Texas and the Texas Rangers rescued Colt from bankrupt oblivion. He never forgot them and he never looked back.[a]

Sam Colt, ca.1851

John C. Hays, 1858 by Mathew Brady, DC.
Courtesy of Harvard Museum of Art.

[a] Tragically, Walker was killed in action just days after receiving from Colt a pair of the guns that bear his name.

San Antonio 1958

On September 27, 1958, the well-known Texas firearms collector S. P. Stevens and his wife, Elizabeth, attended the San Antonio Conservation Society Ball.

A costume affair, guests dressed as Texas pioneers. The couple came as John ("Jack") Coffee and Susan Hays. S. P. brought along his hefty Colt 2nd Model Dragoon, serial number 9343. The local paper described it as:

> "A cap-and-ball six-shooter handsomely engraved and silver plated with a bust of Col. Hays on one side of the barrel and an eagle and Texas flags on the other side. On the grips are the words "Defender of Texas" and "presented to Col. John C. Hays from Sam Colt, Nov. 1849."[2]

Famed Ranger's Pistol

Mr. & Mrs. S. P. Stevens, dressed for the ball and packing.

The Party Crasher

A year or two after the gala,[a] the dean of Colt experts, the *capo di tutti capi,* Herb Glass, examined the Dragoon in a hotel room at a gun show. Author Lucian Cary recounted the episode in his 1961 *The Colt Gun Book*.[3]

"It's the best fake I ever saw," Glass said. "When you've looked at as many Colts as I have you have some kind of feeling for what's right. . . let's say it was just too good."

"Too good." Glass could have thought the gun was made by Thomas Haas of Kankakee, Illinois. An engineer and toolmaker, after World War Two he turned to gunsmithing and earned a reputation for making Colts that were better than, and often thought to be, factory.

To have guns appear as if engraved by a long-dead master, Hass convinced Horacio Q. Acevedo of Mexico City to join him in Kankakee. Acevedo and his family "crossed the river" on May 3, 1959.

Haas-Acevedo guns often pass as originals, but this Dragoon is not one of them. The men did not begin their collaboration until the year after Stevens had the gun at the ball—how long S. P. had it before that, who can say?

Acevedo's son, Horacio F. Acevedo (Acevedo II), a talented engraver and firearms restorer who learned his trade at his father's bench, dismisses the notion out of hand:

> "[I]n 1958 Dragoons were not considered of particular value, and any attempt to duplicate one would have been a waste of effort and not lucrative. With that in mind, I know that neither my father nor Mr. Haas would have created Dragoon 9343."[4]

[a] I spoke with Larry Stevens, S. P.'s son, at the Spring 2021 Texas Gun Collectors' Show. He remembered the costumes, but not the gun—his dad had so many. He also remembered Herb Glass and that he and his dad had a history.

R. L. Wilson

To appreciate how little was known about firearms engraving in 1961, the year of Cary's book, we need look no further than the catalog Robert L. Wilson produced for that year's exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Hartford: *Samuel Colt Presents*.[5]

The exhibit included more than one hundred fifty Colt presentation guns assembled from museums, libraries, and personal collections.

The catalog, handsome and boxed, had black and white photographs of every gun with their full descriptions: model, serial number, caliber, shots–number of; barrel–length of, barrel–shape of; inscriptions, how worded, where placed; just about everything you could think of. But not once in its two hundred ninety-three pages did the catalog attribute engraving to a named engraver.

As the exhibition chairman John S. DuMont, a major Colt collector himself, wrote in the catalog's introduction: "It is doubtful if we will ever be able to pin-point the work of the individual artists."

In 1961, the primary resource for Colt collectors was James Serven's 1954 seminal work, *Colt Firearms 1836-1954*.[6] The first comprehensive study of Colt's models and types, the book was an ambitious undertaking, and, naturally, there were gaps. If engraving was mentioned, it was but as an afterthought.

In 1971, Wilson eclipsed Serven's work with a six-hundred-page treatise, *The Book of Colt Firearms*.[7] Three years later he broke new ground by pulling back the curtain and shining a light on the unexplored world of firearms engraving.

Matching engraving with surviving factory records was pure detective work. Not being an engraver himself, Wilson missed or could not articulate fine points. Still, for collectors, *The Book of Colt Engraving*[8] was like the first peek into King Tut's tomb.

In 1992, Wilson arranged to publish the privately-owned scrapbook of the man now recognized as the foremost engraver of the 19th century, Louis D. Nimschke.[9]

A collection of smoke-pulls Nimschke had taken from guns he engraved and others he liked, it is dated 1850, but the earliest dated pull is from 1854. Presumably, he did not care to remind himself of his earliest works.

Wilson's *Steel Canvas: The Art of American Arms,* with a foreword by the chairman of Tiffany, was published in 1995.[10] *The Colt Engraving Book*,[11] a massive two-volume set, followed in 2001.

To list Larry Wilson's books and articles would fill this page and then some. Wilson was flawed, he had his troubles, that we know. But there is no denying that his contributions to the world of Colt collecting and firearms engraving are inestimable and guide us to this day.

We may rightly divide our knowledge of Colt arms and engraving into the eras of ***Before-Wilson*** and ***After-Wilson***.

Before Cary finished his book, he located the Stevens Dragoon in a collection of the ceramicist, big-game hunter, top skeet shooter, conservationist, philanthropist, and prolific collector Russell B. Aitken of New York and Newport.[a]

Cary wrote that he asked Aitken if he was upset because the gun was fake. No, Aitken said. He liked the engraving. Aitken liked a lot of things.

Aitken died in 2003. His executors chose Christie's to curate and value the estate. Their specialists must have had a field day, many field days. Dealing with everything from African, Indian, and Oceanic art, wildlife art and sculptures, Aitken's personal silver skeet-shooting trophies, vintage firearms, sporting guns, antique arms and armor, militaria, a massive library of rare books, to decoys, must have been a marvelous experience.

When you see the specialists at work, you cannot help but be impressed by their near-encyclopedic knowledge. Still, they're only human.

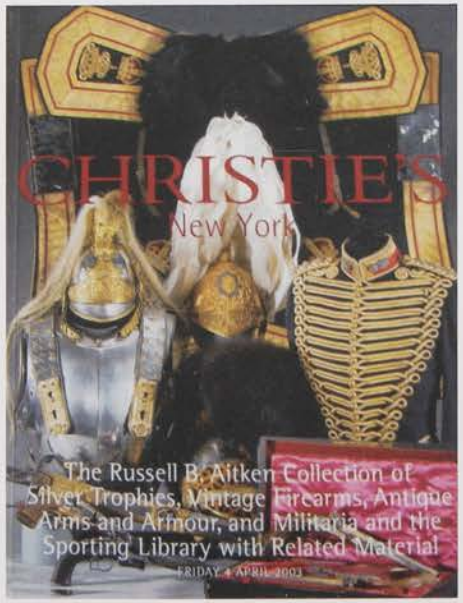
If I may give an example with which I am familiar. It involved a woman's estate, nothing like Aitkens', but big enough. A New York house flew in a slew of specialists, three of whom spent several days sorting through a mountain of jewelry.

Passing by the sorting table, the executrix, who was vaguely familiar with the jewelry, noticed the lead specialist had moved a simple ring with a large blue stone into the pile of costume jewelry. She asked the specialist to take another look.

Giving her colleagues a sideways glance, the young woman took the ring into the sunlight. She later sent it to a certified gemologist in New York. At auction, it knocked down high six figures. Had the executrix not had the gall to challenge the specialist, the simple ring sporting a rare twenty-two carat Burmese sapphire would have been picked up at the estate sale for what, twenty bucks?

Christie's sold the Aitken collections in five auctions. The Stevens Dragoon was in a catch-all together with the silver trophies, other vintage arms, powder horns, powder flasks, armor, imperial helmets, and what every knight should leave at home, a chastity belt.

Describing the Dragoon could have been done in no time. Glass said it was fake—case closed. Not quite.



Christie's 292 page catalogue covered the waterfront.

[a] The Russell Barnett and Irene Roosevelt Aitken collections are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Recently opened there is the Annie Laurie Aitken gallery of British decorative arts.

Something, we don't know what it was, told the specialist he better take a closer look.

It could have been the gun's condition. As Acevedo II notes, the bolt drag marks on the cylinder, wear on the nipples (having no sign they were ever removed), and the wear on the cylinder ratchet show "honest wear that would be technically impossible to duplicate."

"Honest wear" as seen on the wedge, arbor, and cylinder.

Maybe it was the barrel address. Acevedo II says it's perfect, and the "peeling shows natural flaking from use. . .[t]he important detail is no presence of copper under these chipped areas. This is not impossible to replicate, but the patina is paramount."[a]

[a] See letter from Acevedo to the author, dated July 6, 2021, attached.

Or, it could have been the *U.S.* stamped below the cylinder on the left frame. Colt, intent on selling Dragoons to the government, had many of them stamped *U.S.*, but not all passed inspection, some were condemned. Government inspectors stamped condemned guns with a small "o." If the specialist looked beneath the stocks of 9343, he'd have found a small "o" on the left strap.

So, either the gun was a legitimate Colt that had been condemned, or it was a fake Dragoon made to appear as if condemned, which the faker then engraved and plated. Who does that?

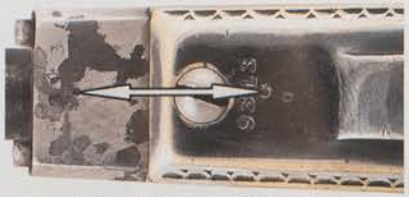
Then there was the engraving. Setting aside for the moment the question of who the engraver may have been, Christie's must have noticed that near each of the four stamped serial numbers there was a deep punch-dot.

In 1974, Wilson documented these as factory symbols that marked a gun for special handling, preparatory to plating and possibly engraving. How, before 1858, would a faker have known not only to put punch-dots, but also right where they belong?

No one's perfect, but Glass overlooking all of that?

The poor specialist. I can see him with head hung low, moaning, "Why me?"

U.S. stamp, left frame.



Punch-dots on frame and trigger guard.

The Word Game

The back pages of Christie's catalog, as is industry practice, were filled with fine print that spelled out the terms and conditions of the auction. The first entry made clear that Christie's was not acting on its own behalf, but as an agent for its principal, the Aitken estate. Accordingly, any sale was a contract between the estate and the buyer.

As its agent, Christie's owed the estate a fiduciary duty, meaning it had to act first and foremost with the needs of the estate in mind, and ensure Christie's had no conflict of interest.

Catalog descriptions are literal expressions of the auctioneer's fiduciary obligation. They don't have to be perfect, but they must meet the standard of a professional who claims expertise in the subject field.

Auction descriptions are comprised of two parts: the heading and the narrative below. Auction houses warrant only that which they state in the heading. For example, if a heading states the gun is an early Colt 1860 Army with fluted cylinders, but the gun is in fact an Italian knock-off, the buyer has recourse.[a]

Auction houses do not warrant what they say in the narratives—they claim it's all opinion. That's debatable, sometimes there are absolute statements of fact. But for puffery and obvious opinion, good luck with that.

Herb Glass said the Dragoon was a fake, but Christie's specialist responsible for writing the description knew it was an honest Colt. And therein lay the problem. Christie's was obligated to describe the gun as they saw it, even if it meant crossing Glass.

That was a conflict, because it would have violated the gun collecting code of omertà—if you want to play at the top, you don't rat.

The Dragoon appeared in a 3 x 5" photo on page 79 with two other Colt percussions—Lots 513, 514, and 515.

[a] Having recourse is one thing, getting it another. You may have the auctioneer dead to rights and still have to go to the mat with Gorgeous George in your corner.

Lot 513 was a Colt 1860 Army "for 1863, decorated by Dewil of Liège." ("For 1863" because that is the production year stated in published tables, but no one knows for sure.[a] "Decorated" because there were inlays and engraving.)

Below the heading, they said Dewil, a top engraver at Fabrique Nationale of Liège for 30 years, did the work in the 1950s. Helpful to a fault, they said the work was "modern."

Then came the Dragoon. The heading read:

A .44 COLT 2ND MODEL DRAGOON PERCUSSION REVOLVER NO. 9343 FOR 1850.

They had no choice, but below the heading they had a freer hand. Christie's narratives often went into great detail, and there was much they could have said about the Dragoon, but they got right to it. It read:

> "Silver-plated and engraved with Nimschke-style scrollwork at a later date, and with later inscription on the back-strap 'Presented to Col. John C. Hays Compliments of Sam. Colt, Nov. 24, 1849' and 'Defender of Texas', matching numbers and figured walnut grips carved 'C. Taylor T*R.'"

Every word of it is true, and, if you are like me, the word "later" brings you up short. That's why it was there.

When Christie's wanted to say the locks on the 17th century chastity belt were not period correct, they described them as being "of a later date." To say that most of the decoration of a 16th century German wheel-lock was not period correct, again, they described it as being "of a later date."[b]

[a] In my study of the Colt Open Top .22, I discovered the tables to be off by as much as two years. I asked Wilson about this. He threw up his hands. He referred to production dates as circa.
[b] Lots 463 and 540, respectively.

If Christie's thought the Nimschke-style engraving was not period correct they would have said it was "of a later date." But didn't say that. Why?

Because, they knew it was period correct and to say it was not would have put them in breach with their consignor. Christie's-legal would have frowned on that, especially as the house enjoyed a profitable relationship with Aitken's widow, Irene Roosevelt.[a]

Their solution was to imply "of a later date," without actually saying it, or anything else that was untrue.

They wrote that the gun was made in 1850, more or less, and was "engraved . . . at a later date." That had to be true—you can't engrave a gun before it is made. But how much later was later? A day, a year, one hundred years? They didn't say—they didn't have to.

They knew that just having the word "later" in the description would be enough for collectors to assume they meant the engraving was 20th century. That would square things with Glass. He could say Cary misquoted him, it was always about the engraving.

It's possible the specialist was unsure, but with so much at stake there was no room for half-measures.

After the auction, stories circulated in Texas where old hands said they knew who cut the scrolls, who did the tableau, and wasn't it that fellow down yonder who worked up the inscription.

* * * * *

All of the foregoing happened long before I knew anything about Sam Colt, the Texas Rangers, you name it—long before I ever thought I'd own a gun, much less take such interest in them.

I came to this story stone cold five years ago when an acquaintance sent me photographs of the Dragoon. Knowing nothing about Colt percussions—they all look alike to me—I sent the pictures to an historical arms dealer with whom I've exchanged information from time to time. He said he'd seen lots of guns and this one he didn't like. He didn't even like the wording of the inscription.

[a] Christie's had recently sold for Mrs. Aitken an extensive collection of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's personal papers. Requests to Christie's-legal for comment have gone unanswered.

He was only familiar with *Sam Colt* and *Col. Colt.* Thumbing through a Wilson engraving book, you can find Colt presentation inscriptions also from *S.C., Sam Colt, Samuel Colt,* and *the Inventor.*

Moving on, I sent the images to two forensic engravers. Both liked it, reserving judgment, naturally, until they could inspect the gun first-hand. One, however, wanted to go partners right away. I wasn't keen on that, the obvious conflict could only mean trouble down the road. I moved the conversation along.

While hitting the books and the internet, I tracked down the owner, called him, and tried to buy the gun—cheap. The engraving might be 20th century. On the other hand, proving it was the real deal would take time and money. Convincing collectors, well, that would be a whole 'nother kettle of fish.

The owner and I spoke many times about many things. Bottom-line, he was not going to sell "the pride of his collection." I finally came clean. I told him what the specialists had said, gave him the facts I had gathered, and offered to work with him, gratis, to prove the Dragoon's authenticity. He waved me off.

Later, I heard from my erstwhile partner. He had lost all interest. Nosing around, he said no matter how glowing his opinion—even Gabriel descended blowing his horn—there was no chance. The gun was doomed.

Naturally, when Little John's auctioned the Dragoon in December 2020, I snagged it.

* * * * *

Little John's, as had Christie's, said the gun was a Colt 2nd Model Dragoon, but where Christie's was brief, Little John's was expansive. Not beating around the engraving bush, they said it is all Nimschke-style, and, without naming the engraver, thought the work had been done, roughly, between 1960 and 1970.

Little John's said the gun, with a portrait of Jack Hays on the left lug, was a "magnificent one-of-a-kind Hays tribute." (The Haas-Acevedo thing?)

As Stevens had the gun in 1958, if correct, Little John's were but a few years shy. To examine their opinion, I'll use a year certain, 1955. If you wish, pick a different year.

A Look-see

All that distinguishes a presentation from an ordinary gun is a to-and-from. If you're faking one, give it that and get out of there. Was this just a matter of in for a dime, in for a dollar?

Texas, My Texas. The tableau on the right lug, seen on the cover, sets the theme. The centerpiece, a shield emblazoned with the Lone Star of Texas clutched in the talons of a spread-wing American eagle, is flanked by the flags of the Republic of Texas and the United States. From behind, protrudes a solitary cannon, the "Come and Take It" cannon of Gonzales—the symbol of the first battle fought in the Texas War of Independence. There, from Gonzales to statehood, is the story of Texas.

The killer portrait. Presentations do not require portraits, but if the faker/tribute-maker wanted one, as the presentation was going to Hays, that's who would be on the gun.

The man could have worked from a picture of Hays. If he didn't have one, he could have gone to the library—there's a photograph of Hays, older, in Cary's book.

Yeah, that didn't happen. Even a blind man can see that with that European-military moustache, the goatee, the swell's hairdo, the person on the left lug does not look a bit like any known drawing, painting, or photograph of John Coffee Hays. He doesn't look like an American, much less like a Texan.

Some tribute, some faker.

Dragoon 9343
Hays

1846

ca. 1851

1858, M. Brady, DC

Your best guess? You might start with Napoleon III.

Engraving Forensics

While Wilson was writing his books, dozens of men and women across America took up the challenge of turning guns and knives into works of art.[a]

FEGA. In 1980, C. Roger Bleile, who had been engraving and studying engraving for many years, authored the first of his three books on contemporary engravers.[12] In 1981, he founded the Firearms Engravers Guild of America (FEGA.com) to promote engravers and the art of engraving.

Eyeballing. In the late 1980s, gun collector Dr. Frederic Harris had had it with engraving attributions that were all over the map. He reasoned that if experts could identify a painter's work by style and brush strokes, it should be possible to identify an engraver's work by styles and the manner in which they cut steel.

With microscope photography, Harris distinguished the work of several mid-19th century engravers by indicia not readily observable to the naked eye: the distance between progression marks, depths of cuts, angles into and out of a curve, and so on.

Harris proved it took more than "eyeballing" to identify an engraver's work. An engraver might improve with experience, lose his touch with age, or alter patterns to relieve the boredom, but, through it all, like his fingerprints, the manner in which he handled hammer and chisel remained constant. Harris's *Firearms Engraving as Decorative Art*, completed by his friends after his death, remains a valuable text thirty years on.[13]

[a] **Engraving** includes everything cut into metal by an engraver, whether embellishment (such as scrollwork, motifs, images, and decorative accents) or lettering, as on the backstrap of a gun.

The game's afoot. Some firearms collectors began asking FEGA to identify engravers of antique arms. Bleile and other engravers who had, for their own purposes, been doing that for years, dug right in. They got a boost with the advent of digital photography that provided higher-resolution images and, in reducing photography costs, made possible more and better publications. The internet was a bonanza. With Rock Island Auction setting the standard, superb photos of thousands of guns became available with a mouse click—for free.

Many seasoned generalists can now correctly attribute engraving with high-resolution images alone—though you couldn't prove it by looking at a lot of auction catalogs.

Which is to say, when you have a sticky situation, you best find an independent expert. For Dragoon 9343, I called upon Acevedo II and Roger Bleile.

Joe Friday kind of guys, they are not out to prove anything, they just go where the facts take them. Independent of the collecting community, and having no material interest in guns about which they render opinions,[a] they drill down. Importantly, they did not consult one another in reaching their opinions.

Acevedo II worked from high-resolution images. Bleile, he had the gun for a month, disassembled the piece and examined every part under a 25x lens. Their opinions are attached and, with Bleile's particular findings, posted on my website, discovercolt.com. They have reviewed this piece; any paraphrasing is with their permission.

[a] Bleile was one of the two forensic engravers whose views I initially sought. He was not the one who wanted to partner.

DEFENDER OF TEXAS

Colt 2nd Model Dragoon, 9343
Presentation from Sam Colt to John C. Hays
Primary engraving by Louis D. Nimschke

Chicken or egg. What came first, the engraving or the plating?

Colt's gave special attention to guns that were to be plated and/or engraved. To single these guns out, they were stamped with symbols near the serial numbers on the barrel, frame, trigger guard, and butt. The Dragoon, Bleile reports, has the period appropriate symbol, a punch-dot, stamped in those locations.

Interestingly, Bleile remarks that that the cylinder scene which was typically roll-died onto Dragoons, was not roll-died onto this one. The engraver had a pristine cylinder to work with.

If a gun had been blued, re-purposing it for plating and engraving was not a big deal. The bluing would be stripped, the gun given a mild acid bath, and then polished with fine rouge. This would not reduce the sharpness of the edges or degrade the markings.

Whether the Dragoon went through this process we don't know, but Bleile's examination reveals that the body of the gun was stamped and engraved before it was silver-plated. The evidence for this is the presence of tarnished silver in the factory markings and engraving.

The backstrap is a different story. There, Bleile found tarnished silver in the serial number stamped on the butt, but not in the engraving. Meaning, the backstrap was plated after stamping, but the engraving was cut through the plating.

The physical evidence does not tell us when the backstrap was engraved, but it does tell us that when it was done the backstrap was in fine, unhandled condition. We know this from Bleile's findings which confirm all handling, scars, and age marks are above or into the plating and engraving. In other words, all the work was done before the gun was shipped to a third party.

Why engrave it? Condemnation did not make a gun worthless. Colt could send it to the civilian market, re-purpose it as a presentation, as-is, or, to whatever end, have it engraved and inscribed as a presentation after that.

We know that in July 1849, when traveling in Europe, Colt sent to the factory thirty-five Boulle cases which were to hold fifty guns.

He instructed the company treasurer, his cousin Elisha Colt, to have the guns engraved in the best "stile" possible and display them at exhibitions in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Colt was after gold medals that he needed to promote his guns in Europe.

If Elisha couldn't get the work done on time, Colt said he'd cut his trip short, sail back to America, and get the guns engraved himself. Elisha got the message and Colt got his medals.

Fifteen of the guns were to be large Dragoons. It's not unreasonable to think Elisha selected some *U.S.* stamped, military-condemned Dragoons for engraving and exhibition.

Postulating. The faker could have worked with a condemned gun that survived more than one hundred years with no more than a minor blemish and done the necessary prep. It is unlikely he would have known to put punch-dots right where they belong—their existence and significance were not generally known until documented by Wilson in 1974.

Or, he could have worked with a condemned gun that was factory-punch-dotted, and even factory prepped, that fell through a time warp. Rather than appreciating the value of the near-perfect piece, he decided to take a whack at faking a Colt presentation.

It takes a lot of yoga to stretch like that.

Staged work. Although I would think to do all engraving (including the inscription), before plating, at Colt's doing it the other way around was business as usual.

In the *Sam Colt Presents* catalog, Wilson quotes a letter Colt sent from New York to Milton Joslin at the factory. He told Joslin to pick a top-notch engraved Colt 1851 Navy, have the backstrap inscribed *To Hugh Rose/ From Sam'l Colt,* case it with accessories, and send it to him that night.[14a]

Journeyman L. D. Nimschke. No engraving was necessary to create a fake presentation other than the to-and-from, but the faker wanted it all. If he had looked around, he'd have seen that simple donut scrolling would have sufficed. He went for the brass ring, long before anyone knew what the brass ring was.

[a] The gun was in the *Sam Colt Presents* exhibition, but was no longer in its original case. It was then in a three-gun case with two other guns, both engraved but neither was inscribed. Pp. 120-121. The famous *Three-Gun Rose Presentation* was on loan from Herb Glass.

Nimschke arrived in the United States in 1849 or 1850. We know his work from his days as a master, the 1860s and later. Bleile observes the Dragoon's scrolls lack the refinement and maturity of Nimschke's later work but are consistent with what we would expect from him when an eighteen-year-old journeyman, those years apparently missing from his scrapbook.

Bleile attributes to Nimschke the scrolls on the sides of the barrel, the frame, the Texas motif, the shoulders of the backstrap, and the intertwining scrolls on the butt. And, of course, his hallmark tour de force, the scroll with no beginning and no end that rings the cylinder.[14]

It is, Bleile says, the earliest Nimschke work he has seen, making it, perhaps, the earliest Nimschke work known.

Nimschke could have engraved the background, scrolls beside the barrel address, and the portrait, but they are not, as Little John's said, Nimschke-style. Others could just as easily have done the work.

Bleile and Acevedo II say it was common for masters to parcel out work. It gave the journeymen and apprentices a variety of experience. Also, if the master was deluged with work, he could speed production by assigning engravers specific tasks, assembly-line style—a practice that continues to this day.

The tableau. In 1847, Colt engaged the banknote engraver W. L. Ormsby to create a cylinder scene to roll-die onto Walkers. The scene would serve two purposes: promote Colt's guns by playing up their association with the heralded Texas Rangers, and prevent counterfeiting. The subject was to be the Ranger-Comanche Battle at Walker's Creek, as Walker described it to Colt.

With rare exception, engravers do not create their own images—they copy. On June 18, 1842, The Illustrated London News published on its front page a drawing of Texas Rangers as they were—dressed in all manner of frontier garb, save anything that resembled a uniform.

Ormsby likely saw the Illustrated's image, but decided to depict Rangers as nattily uniformed United States Army Dragoons. There were probably scores of prints he could draw upon.

To create the cylinder scene, Ormsby married images of Dragoons with those of Comanches on horseback painted by the artist George Caitlin.[15]

Ormsby created and engraved all Colt's cylinder scenes. Sometime in 1849, he began designing the scene for the 1851 Navy. Knowing more of American history than the German engravers, if called upon, Ormsby could have easily sketched designs for others to engrave.

The pesky portrait. The skill set needed for engraving life figures is a discipline apart from scrolling. Nimschke later had it, but it is not evident here. The naïve engraving of the portrait on the Dragoon's is similar to that of the contemporaneously engraved portraits of Washington, Lafayette, and Ben McCulloch (mistakenly identified as Colt) shown in *Magnificent Colts* on pages 510-511.[16a]

Ben McCulloch on 1851 Navy, 6471 (identical to the "Sam Colt" portrait shown in *Magnificent Colts*) and George Washington on Colt 3rd Model Dragoon, 10222 .

That the portrait is not of Hays or anyone we might readily recognize tells us the choice of subject was not then important. A fancy portrait for a fancy gun was good enough, evidencing perhaps that Colt, the micro-manager, was not around when the gun was engraved. He may have been in Europe.

Inscriptions. Generally, it is not possible to attribute backstrap lettering to a particular engraver. Hammer and chisel were not typically used for such work. Rather, engravers used burins that they pushed through the soft metal. Hammer-and-chisel leaves telltales; burin pushing does not.

Acevedo II says the "inscription is perfect. Totally in keeping with style and execution of the period."[17]

[a] Wilson attributes the engraving to Ormsby. Art historian Arthur Tobias says Ormsby, Jr., maybe.

Lettering, like cutting life figures, requires skills different from those needed for scrolling. Firearms engravers were rarely called upon to do such work, so few guns were inscribed.

There were, however, jewelers and engravers whose stock in trade was lettering plaques, trophies, and pocket watches. They could whip out inscriptions in no time. Acevedo II and Bleile believe such artisans cut most firearms inscriptions.

Who was that masked man? A talent capable of executing the scrollwork is not born overnight. The man would have been known, at least to other engravers.

Ignoring the other reasons for ruling out the gun as a Haas-Acevedo creation, if they chose to copy a Nimschke gun, it would have been one from his years as a master, not one partially worked by him when a journeyman.

Other than Acevedo, whose work he has not examined for such a purpose, Bleile can think of no 20th century engraver who could have cut, or would have forsaken his style to recreate, not just Nimschke's work, but his work as an eighteen-year old journeyman. He looks forward to hearing from anyone who can demonstrate otherwise.

Factory repair. A small six-pointed star is stamped on the right rear of the trigger guard. I am told this indicates factory repair in the late 19th or early 20th century. Colt historian Don Jones has certain Colt repair records, but Dragoon 9343 is not within their range.

Bleile observes that the star, about 1/10" wide, was produced by a stamp having twelve flat sides with sharp edges and a hollow interior. There is tarnished silver in the flats, indicating the gun could have been plated after it was stamped, but Bleile concludes that did not happen. Rather, he says, it is more likely that the flat sides which formed the outline drove plated steel into the frame.

He found no evidence of repair work.

Six-pointed star, rear right trigger guard, about 1/10 inch across.

The Texans

Colt keenly felt his debt to Texas and was in awe of Texas Rangers Sam Walker, Jack Hays, and Ben McCulloch, and the victor of San Jacinto Sam Houston.

He may have been climbing gaining fame and fortune, but these men had achieved something he could only dream of. They had etched their names into the pantheon of American military heroes.

A Texas token? In 1847, Colt gave Hays a pair of Walkers, and in December of that year sent him Whitneyville-Hartford Dragoon 1166. That gun is inscribed, *Col. John C. Hays PRESENTED BY Samuel Colt*, but there was more. The shield is engraved with a Lone Star above the sentiment, ***TEXAS***.

In January 1848, Colt presented to McCulloch Whitneyville 1337. The shield is engraved ***FREE*** above a horse jumping a prickly pear cactus.

Hays and McCulloch may have been pleased to receive the guns, but tired of lugging four pounds of steel around, in June 1849, they asked Colt for smaller revolvers.[18]

Colt's use of the shield to express a sentiment was not something he did for others. On ordinary presentations, the shield was left blank. On embellished guns, there would be an ornamental flourish. Perhaps it was for Colt a means to express his gratitude to those whom he owed so much.

Putting ***Defender of Texas*** on the shield of Dragoon 9343 would have been in keeping with a tradition Colt began in 1847.

The date tells a tale. The inscription on the Dragoon reads: *Presented to Col. John C. Hays/Compliments of Sam Colt, Nov. 24, 1849*. No faker would put that date on the gun.

Serven, in his 1954 book, gave the production range for 2nd Model Dragoons as 1850-1851. Christie's would not be bound by that and neither would Wilson—he tagged production dates *circa*. What would a collector say? "Impossible—the gun was made later. Fake!"

Many guns in the *Sam Colt Presents* exhibition had dates in the inscriptions—their significance unknown. In the catalog, Wilson listed only those dates that were "indicative of approximate dates of manufacture."[19] Wilson may have thought, as many do, the date is the day the engraver cut the inscription.

Consider a couple that goes to a jewelry store and purchases a pair of matching bands. They ask to have their initials inscribed on the insides of the bands with a date seventeen years before. Will the jeweler refuse to inscribe the date because it is not indicative of the date of manufacture, or will he do as he's asked? If there is a date in an inscription, it is there because that's what the customer wanted.

Sam Houston. As it happens, November 24, 1849, was an important date in Texas history. Few may have appreciated it then, no one remembers it now. But to Sam Houston, it was a big deal.

That day, the Texas legislature agreed with Congress that eastern border of Texas would be the boundary set in the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty with the Spanish. This was not a matter of dispute, but for Houston it was the first step in the fight for the state's northern and western borders.

Then a United States Senator, he fought for his state's western border to be the Rio Grande—the entire length of it—and insisted Texas should have all land to its east—half New Mexico.[20] History and most of Congress were not on his side. Texas, they said, should stop at the Nueces.

Colt would have been aware of what Houston was up to. They had a close relationship and corresponded regularly. Colt returned to Hartford in November, when Houston was at his most vocal.

Houston ranked high in Colt's book, in no small measure because he lobbied for the thousand-gun contract.[21] If Colt already had a gun engraved with a Texas theme, he might have thought to give it Houston. With "Defender of Texas" on the shield, keeping to the custom he started with Hays and McCulloch, and with "November 24, 1849" in the inscription, the gun would have fit Houston to a tee.[a]

But, Houston wanted a small pistol,[22] and Colt had bigger Texan fish to fry.

California. In 1849, Hays and McCulloch were California bound. Colt revolvers that sold in New York for $38, in that lawless land fetched $200 or more.

Hays was all over the news. The papers told of his every move, even his death from cholera. Overcoming that infirmity, in April 1850 he was elected sheriff of San Francisco County. McCulloch, hardly mentioned those days, settled in Sacramento. He, too, was elected sheriff, in late 1850.

Hays would have gotten the nod. It did not matter whether Hays wanted or used the gun. Colt had given elaborately decorated guns to presidents, princes, and czars. Beautiful guns in the possession of storied people was publicity he couldn't buy.

[a] McCulloch's Whitneyville Dragoon has January 4, 1848 in the inscription, its significance is not known.

Creed Taylor, Texas Ranger

John Hays died at his home in Alameda County, California, on April 21, 1883. His biographer, James Greer, wrote Hays died intestate.[23] Surprisingly, for all Greer's attention to detail, we find Hays left a will. It was probated on May 9, 1883. He probably did not make specific bequests, but we'll never know. The will is missing from the archives.[24]

If Hays had the gun, how did it get to Texas so that Stevens could take it to the costume ball? There is a mighty clue on the grips. You can't miss it. The auctioneers described it, but ignored it.

It's the carving in the figured walnut stocks that proclaims, "I'm the property of *C. Taylor / T*R.*" It's no great leap to say that was the work of Texas Ranger Creed Taylor.

Carved stocks, Colt Dragoon 9343

Born in 1820, Taylor fought at Gonzales, Concepción, the Siege of Bexar, and San Jacinto. In 1840, he rode with Hays at Bandera and with McCulloch at Plum Creek. In 1842, he fought side-by-side with McCulloch at the Salado.

That year, his wife, Nancy Matilda, gave birth to their firstborn. They named the boy John Hays.

Taylor went to Mexico with the Rangers and remained an active Ranger into his 80s. He rarely missed San Antonio's San Jacinto Day celebration, where survivors of that battle were feted and given a carriage for the Battle of Flowers Parade. In 1905, he participated in the floral tribute at the gates of the Alamo.[25] Taylor died in 1906. In 1967, a Texas historical marker was set at the site of his ranch in Kimble County.

John Hays Taylor predeceased his father. Shot in 1869, he was a casualty of the Taylor-Sutton feud.

Creed Taylor (1820-1906)

How Taylor got the gun we can't say, but get hold of it he did. Did he have it when he died? There's no telling. He made no specific bequests in his will.[26] We don't have anything by way of provenance—

or do we…

A Special Gun

The article about S. P. Stevens at the Conservation Society Ball, may not be the only time the Dragoon was mentioned in a newspaper. In 1910, the Galveston Daily News, the Texas paper of record, published a two-part series on Texas Rangers by its celebrated newsman Ben C. Stuart.

Part One, *Greatest Texas Ranger's Career; Some of His Daring Deeds,* was about—who else—Jack Hays.[27 a] After discussing the Mexican War, in a "Stop the Presses" moment, Stuart interrupts his narrative:

> "In the attempt to verify the tradition that Colonel Colt had presented Hays with a special revolver, the writer [Stuart] addressed a query to the Colt Arms Company at Hartford, Conn. and under date of April 15 1910 received the following reply:
>
> 'We acknowledge the receipt of your valued favor of the 22d and regret we have no means of ascertaining in regard to the revolver which was said to have been presented by Colonel Colt to Colonel Hays. Our record of these old powder and ball guns was destroyed by fire many years ago.'" [28]

Stuart would not have written to Colt Arms without good reason or broken into his story because of a campfire tale—the tradition. He was telling his readers he had seen a gun the famous Sam Colt may have given to their own John Coffee Hays. And, it was "special." We could stand more details, but Stuart was not writing for us.

We know of several guns Colt presented to Hays, which did Stuart see? It could not have been one of the two Colt Walkers sent under a letter dated June 3, 1847.[29]

Stuart would not have known of the letter, and, except perhaps for a story earnestly told, had no reason to believe either was a presentation.

Walkers today rank high, but in 1910 they were old cap-and-ball guns, worn and battered from hard use and kids playing Cowboys and Indians. Stuart would not have done cartwheels over that.

The same goes for Whitneyville Dragoon 1166. To those not collectors, even cased, it's a well-used gray gun with a bit of engraving on the shield. A presentation? Yes. Special?

Lastly, there is Colt 1851 Navy, 98229.[a] The inscription reads, "To John C. Hays/with Compliments of Col. Colt." The portrait on the left lug strongly resembles Jack Hays, as he appears in Mathew Brady's 1858 photograph, taken when Hays and Colt both happened to be in the Capitol and first met.[30]

The Navy could be Stuart's gun, except that in 1910 it was in California. It did not arrive in Texas until the 1960s, when Texas collector Shell Storedollen acquired the piece from Hays's descendants.[31 b]

There we are, four Colt-Hays presentations and not one a good fit for Stuart's description. Could it be, the gun Stuart saw had long been in Texas? So long that in possession of a famous Texas Ranger, then dead but four years, it was the subject of local lore.

Could Stuart have said the gun was special because it was elaborately engraved and silver-plated? Could he have been convinced Colt gave the revolver to Hays because the inscription said so, plain as day?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, if Stuart was not looking at Dragoon 9343, what gun was it? Where is it now?

---

[a] Part two, *Stories of Early Day Texas Rangers*, is subtitled *Made Colt's Guns Famous.*

[a] Colt Navy 98229 is in the author's collection. It was on loan from G. de Graffenreid to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame for three decades. In 1979, it was in the Texas Gun Collectors display at the NRA meeting in San Antonio; vetted by Bobby Vance, Display Committee chair, and Coordinator of Guns Acquisition.

[b] There are two photos of Hays said to have been taken by Brady in 1858. I am referring to the image of Hays standing.

Concluding Remarks

I do not pretend to have all the answers. Like many of us who probe Colt history, I am merely trying to put together a puzzle without having all the pieces. If I faked a gun, though, you can bet I'd have it all buttoned up, wrapped in tissue, and tied with Colt blue ribbon.

Acevedo II concludes Dragoon 9343, "is a fine and great find, and of great and authentic historical significance."

Bleile say that judging the engraving to be other than original requires compounding so many remote improbabilities, it strains the mind. He writes:

> "Colt Second Model Dragoon .44 Caliber Percussion Revolver, Serial Number 9343 with extensive engraving, including the inscription "Presented to Col. John C. Hays/Compliments of Sam Colt, Nov. 24, 1849," is authentic, original, and, save for carving in the butt and handling marks, unaltered.
>
> Presented by Sam Colt to John C. Hays, later owned by Texas Ranger Creed Taylor, it is the earliest engraving by Master Engraver Louis D. Nimschke known to this examiner."

The armory fire of 1864 destroyed most of the records of Colt's Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing Company, the company Sam Colt incorporated in 1855. Many of his pre-incorporation records were also lost. So, though we know Colt was lavish with presentations authenticating them is difficult. Wilson, for *Sam Colt Presents*, documented some with letters of gratitude and other records. For some we can build a case. But many are accepted as authentic notwithstanding misspellings and errant lettering.

In judging Dragoon 9343, dear reader, apply your tests, by all means, but kindly consider too that offered herein.

Robert Swartz
opentop55@yahoo.com

C. Roger Bleile
Author, Engraver, Arms Consultant
FEGA Official Historian FEGA.Historian@gmail.com

May 20, 2021

Subject: Colt Second Model Dragoon pistol #9343

To whom it may concern:

I have been asked to examine an engraved and silver-plated Colt Second Model Dragoon pistol, serial number 9343 bearing the inscription "**Presented to Col. John C. Hays/Compliments of Sam Colt, Nov. 24, 1849**" with the aim of authenticating the engraving, markings, and finish of said pistol. Along with the inscription, the pistol features bold scrollwork, an eagle motif, a portrait within an oval, and other hand engraved embellishments as well as carving in the butt of the grips.

My examination focused on several elements, including the style of scrollwork, scroll elements and shading, ornamental motifs, border designs, metal cutting techniques, and the presence or absence of a signature or distinctive engraver's mark. I have examined these elements for points of comparison with known and documented examples of the work of known engravers.

In the case of #9343, I have personally examined the pistol as well as high resolution photos of it. Upon first seeing the pistol, it was immediately obvious that it was engraved in the style of renowned 19th century engraver, Louis Daniel Nimschke (1832-1904) whose workshop was in New York City and was active from 1850 to 1904.

Dragoon #9343 was in my possession for approximately one month during which time I fully disassembled the pistol and subjected the gun to close scrutiny of every part assisted by a Leica A60 binocular microscope. During this time, I made copious notes of my findings and associated research. You will find attached my 16-page outline report detailing all aspects of my examination including conclusions regarding the authenticity and originality of #9343, its specifications, condition, engraving, markings, and finish.

To summarize my findings, I have determined that #9343 is an authentic Colt Second Model Dragoon pistol, with period correct engraving, made in 1850. All hand engraving, stamps and roll die markings were applied prior to the original silver plating of the steel parts. The brass backstrap and trigger guard were silver plated prior to the inscription and ornamental motifs being engraved but the serial numbers and factory stamps are crisp and under the plating.

All scrollwork and the eagle motif on the right barrel lug are the early work of L. D. Nimschke. The portrait on the left lug is unidentified and most likely an idealized representation of a Texas Ranger. The engraver of the portrait cannot be specifically determined. There was no engraver's signature or mark found on the gun. Nimschke only signed a small portion of his later work, even more rarely on pistols. At this early stage of Nimschke's career it is highly unlikely that he would have signed any of his work.

In conclusion, Colt Second Model Dragoon .44 Caliber Percussion Revolver, Serial Number 9343 with extensive engraving, including the inscription "**Presented to Col. John C. Hays/Compliments of Sam Colt, Nov. 24, 1849**," is authentic, original, and, save for carving in the butt and handling marks, unaltered. It is the earliest engraving by Master Engraver Louis D. Nimschke known to this examiner.

Sincerely,

C. Roger Bleile

Acevedo RESTORATION AND ENGRAVING
100 WEST CHARLES ST. KANKAKEE, IL
815.935.5445

July 6, 2021

Dear Mr. Swartz,

In response to your request for a letter of opinion regarding Colt 2nd model Dragoon SN9343, engraved:

I am Horacio F. Acevedo, the son of Master Engraver Horacio Q. Acevedo. Tom Haas Sr. recruited my father from Mexico City to work as an engraver for Sr's Guns Unlimited in Kankakee, Illinois. Our family entered this country on March 3, 1959. My father began working not only on engraving, but also restoring all types of firearms and edged weapons.

In 1961 or '62 my father began duplicating the roll dies for Colt's percussion pistols. Up until then each cylinder was cut by hand. Over the years, my father, along with Mr. Haas, garnered a reputation of being able to restore and duplicate finish and engraving that were indistinguishable from the original.

I was a "shop rat" from my youth, working under my father in his shop and learning his techniques. Around the time of my 13th birthday, I had already begun engraving. Shortly thereafter I was polishing the guns for restoration and/or engraving. I also began plating.

At 15, I took a job at a local jewelry store, but continued helping in the shop. It wasn't until my 30s, after being laid off from a sporting goods store where I worked as an engraver, that I began working with my father full-time.

Now 64, I have had much experience working, restoring, and engraving all manner of firearms, edged weapons, and even Japanese swords, some many hundreds of years old. That brings me to the subject of Dragoon 9343 about which you gave me a brief history and asked for my opinion.

Before getting to the details, Dragoons in 1958 were not considered of particular value, and any attempt to duplicate one would have been a waste of effort and not lucrative. With that in mind, I know that neither my father nor Mr. Haas would have created this pistol.

This is not to disparage the "experts" whose opinions you related, everyone is entitled to an opinion. I have had the advantage of having not only the information on such pieces but also hands-on experience working with a true Master and teacher, learning, above all else, how to observe and pay attention to details. Here are my observations:

1. Cylinder. The style is completely in keeping with early L.D. Nimschke's work. More important is the wear on this part, i.e., drag marks from the bolt, wear on the nipples, that show no evidence of ever having been removed, as well as the condition of the cylinder ratchet. All this shows is honest wear that would be technically impossible to duplicate.

2. The Barrel address is perfect. The peeling shows natural flaking from use. The important detail is no presence of copper under these chipped areas. This is not impossible to replicate, but the patina is paramount.

3. The engraving on the sides of the address is a simple pattern and is in my opinion original though not the same style as the cylinder. It was commonplace to have multiple individuals working on the same piece.

4. The inscription is perfect. Totally in keeping with style and execution of the period. Secondary detail is in the wonderful fit of the grips that show no sign of being tampered with or abused.

5. Bottom view of frame. Trigger guard and frame numbers perfect, and wear is totally consistent with that of all above areas. Image of proofs and inspection marks are totally correct.

6. Right and left views of pistol, as well as image of left side of frame showing cocked hammer, continue to confirm my opinion that this is a fine original piece.

7. The only negative feature of this Dragoon is the primitive carving on the butt. That being said, it is consistent with the alterations of that time.

In conclusion, this is a fine and great find, and of great and authentic historical significance.

Respectfully,

Horacio F. Acevedo

1 Colt, S., Walker, S. H., & Whitney, E.(1992) *Saml. Colt's own record of transactions with Captain Walker and Eli Whitney, Jr. in 1847*, Prescott, AZ: Wolfe Pub. Pp. 81-81.
2 Famed Ranger's Pistol. (1958, September 21). *San Antonio Express and News*, p. 45.
3 Cary, L. (1961). Is that Colt a Sleeper or a Fake? In *The Colt Gun Book*. Greenwich , CT: Fawcett
4 Acevedo, Horacio F., Kankakee, IL, [Letter to Robert Swartz] 2021, July 6. Attached.
5 Wilson, R. L. (1961). *Samuel Colt Presents: a loan exhibition of presentation percussion Colt firearms, Wadsworth Athenaum, Hartford, 3 November 1961 to 14 January 1962.*
6 Serven, James E. (1954). *Colt Firearms 1836-1954*, Foundation Press.
7 Sutherland, R.Q., & Wilson, R. L. (1971). *The Book of Colt Firearms.*
8 Wilson, R. L. (1974). *The Book of Colt Engraving*. W. Beinfeld Publications.
9 Wilson, R. L. (1992). *L.D. Nimschke: firearms engraver*. R & R Books.
10 Wilson, R. L. (1995). *Steel Canvas: the Art of American arms.* Random House.
11 Wilson, R. L., Brown, G. A., Wilson, R. L., & Wilson, R. L. (2001). *The Colt Engraving Book.* Bannerman's.
12 Bleile, C. R. (1980). *American Engravers*. Beinfeld Publishing, Inc.
13 Harris, F. A. (1989). *Firearms engraving as decorative art: The origin of American firearms engraving motifs in the decorative art of the Middle East.* Seattle, WA: B.R. Harris.
14 See, e.g., Wilson, *L.D. Nimschke*, p. 90, and pet Acevedo.
15 Tobias, A. (2011). *Colt Cylinder Scenes, 1847-1851:* Arthur Tobias, Artist, p. 9.
16 Lee, R. M., Wilson, R. L., Zilkha, D. E., Korda, M. V., Fox, V., Sandberg, D (2011). *Magnificent Colts*, Yellowstone Press, pp. 511-512
17 Acevedo, op. cit.
18 David K. Torrey, New Braunfels, TX [Letter to Sam Colt]. (1849, June 10). Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT
19 Wilson, *Samuel Colt Presents*, op. cit., p. 289.
20 (1849, November 24). *Danville Weekly Advertiser*, p. 2. "[U.S. Senator] Sam Houston, of Texas has declared in a late address, his determination to sustain the boundaries of that State . . all that part of N. Mexico east of the Rio Grande must become a part of Texas."
21 Colt, op. cit. [Letter to Sam Houston] (1847, Feb 24), p. 49.
22 Rasenberger, J. I. M. (2021). *Revolver: Sam Colt and the Six-shooter that Changed America.* Scribner.
23 Greer, J. K. (1987). *Colonel Jack Hays: Texas frontier leader and California builder*, College Station: Texas A & M Univ. Press, p. 369.
24 I submitted a request to the Clerk of the Superior Court, Alameda County, California, on November 26, 2016. The reply is dated seven months later: June 21, 2107. Included was an alphabetical list of probates for the period. Hays's will was probated as 578.
25 Four Thousand School Children Lay Floral Tributes. (1905, April 29). *San Antonio Gazette*, p. 1.
26 Creed Taylor's will was probated in Kimble County, Texas, on November 7, 1907.
27 Stuart, B. C. (1910, May 8). Greatest Texas Ranger's Career. *Galveston Daily News*, p. 27.
28 The correspondence cannot be found Colt archives at the Connecticut State Library or in the Ben C. Stuart papers at the Rosenberg Library, Galveston.
29 Colt, loc. cit.
30 Colt, S. (1858, February 8). [Letter to Luther P. Sargent], Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
31 Conger, R. N. (1987). *Texas collector: Gaines de Graffenried*, Waco, TX: Texian Press, pp. 28-29. See, also, *Guns of Fort Fisher.* (1973). Waco, Tx: Parks & Recreation Dept City of Waco, Tx.

The Evolution of Sam Colt's Presentations to John C. Hays and Ben McCulloch

Whitneyville Dragoons
Hays 1166 McCulloch 1337

The use of the backstrap shield to convey a sentiment is not seen on presentations to others.

The 2nd Model Dragoon, 9343, Colt presented to Hays has a sentiment on the shield, a Texas tableau, and a portrait, alas, of a man unknown.

Autographed CDV of
Ben McCulloch

Colt could not do less for McCulloch than he had done for Hays. There was no sentiment on the shield of the embellished 1851 Navy, 6471, but there was a Texas tableau and a portrait of --- McCulloch.

Mathew Brady 1858
photograph of John C. Hays

In February 1861, Colt gave Hays embellished 1851 Navy, 98229. There was no tableau, but but at last Hays got *his* portrait on a gun.

Several Colt revolvers have portraits. Some were probably presentations, but how many have the portrait of the person to whom the revolver was presented? We talk about panel guns. Why not presentee-portrait guns such as those Colt gave to Hays and McCulloch?

MISSING: FIFTY FABULOUS COLTS

Collectors on the Hunt

On July 18, 1849, Sam Colt wrote from Vienna to his cousin and company treasurer at the armory in Hartford, Elisha Colt. Elisha was to expect a shipment of thirty-five magnificent Boulle cases and make ready the guns they would hold: fifteen Dragoons (ten in pairs), twenty Baby Dragoons (in pairs, assorted barrel lengths), and fifteen 1849 New Pockets (3, 4, and 5-inch barrels, five each), **fifty in all**.

Colt told Elisha to drop whatever he was doing, put the guns up **"in the most elegant stile possible. . . as good as can be made,"** and display them at fairs in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, and wherever else they could win gold medals. Those baubles worked magic on Europeans. If Elisha couldn't handle it, Colt threatened to come back and do it himself.

Finishing the guns to the nines was no small undertaking. High factory polish and engraving would be standard. Finishes: Colt blue, or plating, nickel or silver, thick. Stocks: the finest.

Chief engineer Elisha Root assembled the guns and kept the line rolling, but engraving was the province of master engravers in New York. Few engravers were masters, but nearly all were German, and recent immigrants. Left to their own devices, they'd turn out lovely scroll-covered guns with hardly a whit of difference between them. That would not do.

The two Elishas probably turned to W.L. Ormsby, the famous banknote engraver, who composed and engraved all Colt cylinder scenes. He was then working on the scene for Colt's 1851 Navys.

Ormsby knew what the bossman wanted and the engravers who could do it. **Most guns would be merely gorgeous, the others, total knockouts.** Whether Ormsby engraved any himself is a discussion in itself, but guiding the masters, sketching out historic themes, and selecting images from the *Bilder Atlas* for artisans to copy, he would have brought cogency and artistic vigor to the big show.

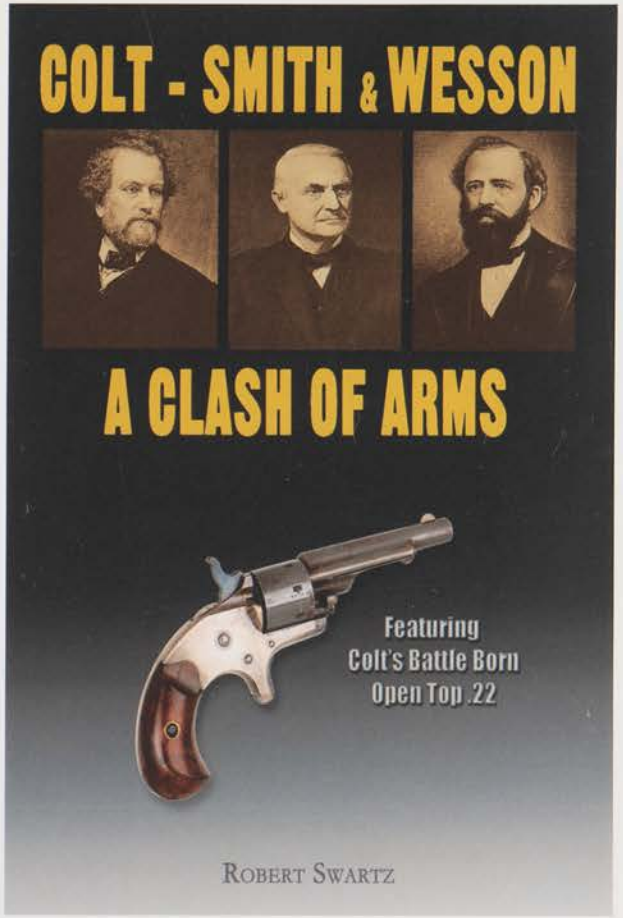
The masters–more than one shop had to be used–when necessary put journeymen and apprentices into production-line mode: one part, one task, one man.

After the fairs closed, the medals won, what to do with the guns? Colt could sell them, present them, or hold them over for other exhibitions, at home and abroad.

No gun has been identified as being made pursuant to Sam Colt's July 18, 1849 order. If you have any information leading to the identity and location of a Fab Fifty, please notify the undersigned. All replies will be held in strict confidence-sure.

ROBERT SWARTZ OPENTOP55@YAHOO.COM

BTW – THEY MUST HAVE DONE OKAY. COLT DID NOT RETURN UNTIL NOVEMBER.



—an excellent discussion of Rollin White's patents which have been neglected in many modern explanations of American firearms development. Swartz renders a complex subject understandable to even the novice collector. I heartily recommend this book to the Colt collector and, indeed, to anyone interested in the evolution of firearms in America. Kurt House

An attorney, avid gun collector, and a student/researcher of antique arms, in pursuing the story of Colt's Open Top .22, Bob Swartz discovered the untold story of one of the most significant events in the history of gun development; the Rollin White/Smith and Wesson saga and all of its ramifications. Dick Salzer, editor, Arms Heritage Magazine.

Available at discovercolt.com, Amazon, and all other online booksellers.

no beginning . . . no end

Eternal Scroll

L. D. Nimschke