A HUNTER'S GUIDE TO CLASSIC AMERICAN HAMMERLESS DOUBLES

PART I OF II

BY STEPHEN WESBROOK

A good hunt is the result of many things—comradery, walking the land and feeling a sense of being part of nature, renewing the ancient bond between hunters and dogs and shooting well when we have opportunities, whether few or many. But it is the total hunting experience that brings us back to the field again and again.

HUNTING WITH CLASSIC SIDE-BY-SIDE shotguns can add new dimensions to that experience. It connects us to our past and preserves an important part of our hunting heritage. Handling a classic side-by-side is different than handling a modern shotgun. Moreover, many hunters find that their shooting improves due to the superior balance and point-ability of these graceful old guns.

Sporting Classics shotgun editor, Robert Matthews, reflecting on a lifetime of experiences associated with shotguns, writes in the 2022 "Guns" issue: "A side-by-side is a tool for bird hunting, and I don't think that I know of any object that serves its intended purpose any better."

This two-part article complements the author's 2021 *Sporting Classics* article, "A Hunter's Guide to Classic American Hammer Shotguns." Both seek to provide relevant information to sportsmen who may be interested in hunting with classic doubles. Both articles address the historic context of the design, manufacture and marketing of the guns. Both articles use the word "classic" in the same way, which is to convey that something: (1) has come to exemplify the best of its kind or class, (2) has a timeless quality of beauty of design and, (3) has been popular or otherwise valued for a long time.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, six premier American brands manufactured hammerless doubles in a broad range of quality and price levels. In chronological order of the introduction, they are Lefever Arms Company, 1884; Ithaca Gun Company, 1888; Parker Brothers, 1888; Hunter Arms Co. (L.C. Smith shotguns), 1890; Remington Arms Co., 1894; and A.H. Fox Gun Co., 1906.

These articles examine six classic hammerless doubles, three in each part. Each, in 12 gauge, was chosen because it was at the fourth-quality level of its manufacturer's hierarchy of quality and price. Each was in production in 1910. These boundaries create a unique opportunity to contrast and compare items of similar character during the same period in time. The six guns selected are:

PART I
ITHACA FLUES NO. 4
A.H. FOX C GRADE
L. C. SMITH NO. 3

PART II
PARKER BROTHERS DH GRADE
LEFEVER ARMS E GRADE
REMINGTON MODEL 1894 D GRADE

THE COMBINED SALES of fourth-quality level shotguns accounted for about three percent of the total production of hammerless doubles by these manufactures, and roughly equaled the combined sales of all of their guns at higher-quality levels. Each of these models had a successful run of at least 20 years.

It's a testament to the guns' quality that customers were willing to spend at least $100 to own one. To put this expense in context, the average metal machinist who worked in the Parker or Lefever factories made 20 cents an hour. Machinists today earn on average more than $20 an hour. Based on the number of hours of salary it took to buy one of these guns, the equivalent cost today would be around $10,000.

The respective collectors' associations tend to have strong views on the quality of their brand of double shotgun. Individuals have favorite guns that shoot best for them. Lists of American "best" shotguns that appear in books and articles include subsets of these brands, although the question of "best at what" is not necessarily addressed.

I have in my gun cabinet a fourth-quality hammerless shotgun made

by each of the six premier American manufacturers. I have hunted them all. I have repaired or reconditioned at Doublegun Preservation various models and grades of double shotguns made by all of these manufacturers.

My premise based on these experiences is that none of these six classic American hammerless doubles is any better than the others. They are just different, and the differences were by design. The impetus to write this article was to understand better the "how" and "why?"

The Double Gun Market in America at the Beginning of the 20th Century

All six premier manufactures were competing for a share of a limited market—the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans. In order to sell enough to be profitable and continue existing, manufacturers had not only to make a very good gun, but also to differentiate it from the domestic competition.

That was a challenge, especially as they collectively chose not to compete with each other based on price. At each grade, the list-price was about the same. The costs of materials to make their guns were similar. They all imported their barrels, both Damascus steel and fluid steel, from Europe until the start of the First World War. The best specialized steel for receivers and mechanical parts also came from Europe. All but one company imported cured English walnut blanks to stock its higher-grade guns.

The six premier manufacturers also shared the same regional labor market, so the cost of turning these raw materials into finished products would have been in the same ballpark. Moreover, none had proprietary technology that gave a company a significant cost advantage. Hence, if one manufacturer designed its model with, for example, higher quality barrels than its competitors, it had to offset the increased material and labor cost by reducing the cost of the locks, stock or engraving. Or, it had to make up the additional expense by reducing marketing, sales or other overhead costs.

To give a sense of potential trade-offs, the barrels accounted for about half the cost of a double-barrel shotgun from around 1870 to 1910. The stock and forend wood accounted for roughly another 25 percent. For each of the six gunmakers, the same locks were used on all grades of their

guns. Hence, as the grade went higher, the percentage of total expense attributed to the locks declined. Conversely, as the grade went higher, the engraving became an increasingly important cost-center.

The shooting sports circa 1900 were substantially different from today. Live-bird competitive shooting was on the wane, but was still popular. Two different formats used live birds. In *columbaire*, a person in the middle of the pigeon ring threw the bird into the air; the shooter's goal was to drop the bird within the boundaries of the ring. In box bird shooting, which was the predecessor to the modern sport of trap, the pigeons were held in individual cages and released by a cord. In both formats, live-bird shooting was a big-money sport, offering large cash prizes and accompanied by extensive gambling.

The popularity of trap shooting was taking off. A dramatic drop in costs following the introduction of clay pigeons and automatic throwers made the sport affordable to America's expanding middle-class. Trap became the dominant shooting sport in America over the next three decades. Skeet was not invented until the 1920s, and sporting clays was not introduced in America until the 1980s.

The hunting environment was also far different from today. For those sportsmen who could afford a $100 gun, waterfowl hunting was the favorite sport. Waterfowl hunting clubs for the wealthy and politically connected thrived, numbering around 2,000 in the early 20th century. An 1894 article in *National Journal* about duck hunting in Maryland reported: "At the present day, duck shooting is peculiarly a rich man's sport. It is invested with the accessories of club-houses, arsenals of shotguns, retinues of retainers, Havana cigars, and unlimited champagne."

The dominant upland gamebird today in the Great Lakes region and the Upper Midwest, the ringneck pheasant, did not reach self-sustaining populations until the end of the 1920s. Regular hunting seasons did not begin until the early 1930s. Upland game hunting in the Southern states meant quail and in New England ruffed grouse. Curiously, American production of what became the preferred gauges to hunt these birds, the 20-gauge and 28-gauge, did not take off until around 1910. The West had an abundance of grouse and waterfowl, but a paucity of people to hunt them; hence limited prospects for gunmakers to sell premium shotguns.

The public demanded and had access to a lot of information about the design of their shotguns. The manufacturers regularly published comprehensive catalogs and were not shy about highlighting the relative merits of their guns. Their catalogs also described in detail the quality of materials and craftmanship that went into each grade of shotgun. Company catalogs were supplemented with full-page advertisements in the annual sales catalogs of high-end retailers such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Von Lengerke & Detmold. In both types of media, the descriptions were organized around the major components of a double shotgun – locks, stock, barrels and engraving.

The manufacturers' descriptions remain useful today to potential buyers of "pre-owned" guns. They are valuable sources of information about the design of the guns and how they differ. However, rather than having to rely on the manufacturers' descriptions regarding the quality of the major components, today's sportsmen have additional means to help reach their own conclusions. One, of course, is photography. The second is hindsight; how well the guns have withstood the test of time.

Each of the following sections addresses one manufacturer and its fourth-quality hammerless shotgun. To explore "why" these classic shotguns differ, each section looks at the company's history and stated vision regarding the type of shotgun it intended to build and for whom. To clarify "how" these shotguns differ, the focus then narrows to that manufacturer's fourth-quality gun. Each of the four major components of a shotgun are described and illustrated using one example of a classic hammerless shotgun that is still on active duty as a hunter.

The Ithaca Flues No. 4

"No. 4, $100 list gun…is our most popular medium-priced gun. It is a show gun, the one we use ourselves, and the gun which brings us more advertising than profit. This is the grade of gun that went to Africa with the Roosevelt party."

— Ithaca Arms Co. 1910 Catalog

Vision and History

Between 1908 and 1926, the Ithaca Gun Company produced 219,000 Flues Model double-barrel shotguns. It was not only Ithaca's most successful double, but one the most popular American hammerless doubles of its era. In the first full year of the gun's production, Ithaca made more than 11,000; production peaked in 1920 at around 27,000 guns.

The Flues Model was preceded by three models, each named for their principal developer—Crass Model, 1888 to 1901; Lewis Model, 1901 to 1906 and Minier Model, 1906 to 1908. The Flues Model was followed by the New Ithaca Double (NID), 1926 to 1948. The Flues double was offered in seven different grades. In 1909, the field-grade gun, the No. 1, listed for $40. The No. 7 gun listed for $400. All grades were offered in four gauges—20, 16, 12 or 10.

Ithaca Gun Company seems to have had a clear vision of what it wanted to accomplish when designing the Flues double. It optimized this gun for the rapidly expanding sport of trap. For instance, in highlighting the strength and durability of its "Improved Model," the 1909 catalog states: "as this goes to press, we have over 15,000 of this model in actual use, the greater part of them with trap shooters…." Also, two-thirds of the "Convincing Testimonials" near the end of the catalog specifically promoting the new model mention superior results on the trap range. The others attest to its general shooting qualities, appearance and construction.

While initial marketing efforts for the Flues focused on clay-target trap shooting, it would not have escaped notice by Ithaca, or its potential customers, that the same characteristics that make a good trap gun also make a good gun for hunting waterfowl. When a well-off sportsman arrived at his private duck hunting club, the gun he carried needed to be effective and attractive. The Flues No. 4 fit the bill.

Ithaca advertising also stressed "the simplicity, speed and strength of the locks." It built that argument around three aspects of mechanical design. The first was the use of coil springs rather than V-springs to power the hammers and the top-lever release action. The second was a three-bolt system to fasten the barrels and receiver. The third, which was unique, was its "lightning-fast lock." It had only three components— sear, hammer with integral cocking arm and coil spring—and it operated in 1/625 of a second. This was especially important to trap shooters and to Ithaca's marketing department, as none of the other companies could match it.

Ithaca also marketed its guns as having higher quality components than its competitors, and yet they were being offered at the same price. This was possible because, as Ithaca explained at the beginning of its 1909 catalog:

"We conduct our own business, employ no professional shooters, have a water power that costs us practically nothing, which saves about one-quarter of the expense attached to the usual method of building and marketing shot guns – that's why we can agree to furnish a gun 25% better, for the same money, than any of our worth competitors."

It's not surprising that Ithaca Flues doubles today do not show up as frequently at side-by-side shooting competitions as some of the other premier brands. It was not designed for skeet or sporting clays. And the shooting sport for which it was designed shifted in the 1920s to favor single-barrel guns.

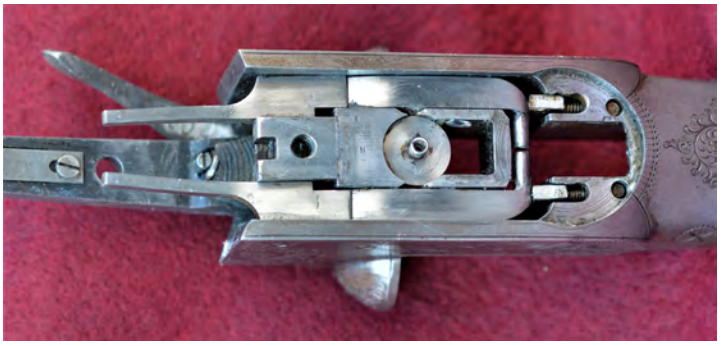
The 12-gauge Flues remains an effective duck gun. And when one needs a long reach while hunting upland game, such as for late-season sharp-tailed grouse or pheasants that have been hunted a lot, it still fits the bill.

The No. 4 Gun

The Flues No. 4E depicted in this article was manufactured in 1908. It weighs 7 pounds, 8 ounces. The length of pull is 14 inches; drop at comb is 1 7/8 inches and the drop at heel is 3 inches. Its ejectors added $10 to the standard $100 list price.

Locks: The improvements Ithaca made in the design of its hammerless boxlock between 1900 and 1908 made it less complex, stronger and lighter. The receiver with bottom metal weighs only 1 pound, 14 1/2 ounces. The fact that Ithaca hand-fitted the metal parts on its No. 4 guns is also a significant element of their quality.

Stock: This stock is made of American walnut. Ithaca was the only company not to use imported European walnut on its fourth-quality guns. The typical trade-off for a manufacturer was between having the density of European walnut vs. the beauty of figured American



walnut. For this gun, however, Ithaca was able to have it both ways. This piece of wood came from where a tree knitted its trunk to a branch, or two branches together, often referred to as crotch wood. In this case, the knitting process produced both high density and beautiful figure.

The strongest points about this stock are the unusual combination of feathering and marbling, the striking contrast of the grain against a multi-tonal background and highlighting. The weakest point is the alignment of the grain, which ideally would flow from the body of the stock through the wrist and stock head.

In the world of gunstocks, there is no objective, universal standard method of how to grade the quality of wood for enhancing a gun. The absence of standard measuring scales leads to individual subjective measurements, particularly in the intermediate grades. In the end, it is the sum of the attributes in a piece of wood that determine its quality. On a scale of zero to six, the gunstock blank used to make this gun was likely a solid four.

Barrels: The barrels on this gun are made of Krupp fluid steel, which the 1909 Ithaca catalog accurately characterized as "exceedingly tough, hard and strong; not easily dented... and will stand an enormous bursting strain." Ithaca also offered on the No. 4 fine Damascus-steel barrels in the American flag pattern. The barrels on this gun are 30 inches long, have 2 3/4-inch chambers with elongated forcing cones and extra-full chokes. They weigh 3 pounds, 9 ounces. This gun throws a pattern with 80 to 90 percent of the pellets striking above the point of aim, which is ideal for trap.

Engraving: The 1910 catalog description of the engraving on the Flues No. 4 is understated: "Frame, top lever, fore end iron and guard nicely engraved by hand, with scroll and line engraving, game scenes on guard and bottom of frame, setter and pointer on the sides." The artistic quality of the engraving is high, as is the coverage at 80 to 90 percent. The engraving of the dogs is very fine and the images realistic. The English scrolls are tight and deeply cut. In 1915, the dogs were replaced by game scenes and the English scroll by a floral and leaf pattern.

Price and Availability Today: Data on price and availability of classic hammerless doubles are readily available from three reliable sources.

The first is the *Blue Book of Gun Values* (*BBGV*), which uses national retail-sales data. It also differentiates based on condition, which is determined by its own methodology. Of course, different criteria can result in different estimates of condition, and hence of value. However, because the *BBGV* has applied its methodology consistently over time, it is the go-to source for comparison of values among different models and for historic trends of a specific model.

The Rock Island Auction Company (RIAC) website lists the results of past auctions. Data from its triannual Premier Firearms Auctions are most useful for graded guns, because these auctions generally will not include guns with condition issues. The Guns International (GI) website is an easily accessed source on current retail availability and asking prices.

The 2022 *BBGV* lists a value of $2,400 for a No. 4E 12-gauge in 70 percent condition. Historic trends have been flat over the past five years. RIAC Premier Firearms Auctions from September 2017 to September 2022 sold three 12-gauge No. 4E guns. The median realized price (hammer price plus buyer's fee) was $1,950. At the end of 2022, GI listed three No. 4E guns listed for sale; the median asking price was $3,575. Based on this data, someone looking for a No. 4 Ithaca Flues 12-gauge should be able to find it at a moderate price, if he or she is patient.

The A.H. Fox C Grade

"GRADE 'C'...is a very high grade gun at comparatively a very low price. These guns are very handsome in appearance and finish and for hard service cannot be excelled.... This is an ideal gun for trap or field shooting."

—A. H. Fox Gun Co. 1909 Catalog

Vision and History

Founded in 1907 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the A. H. Fox Gun Co. was the last premier American shotgun company to enter the market. It was also the shortest lived; its 22-year run ending with its acquisition by Savage Arms in 1929. The A.H. Fox Gun Co. manufactured some 130,000 shotguns.

Fox initially offered only 12 gauge shotguns in Grades A, B, C, D and F. Respectively, they listed for $50, $75, $100, $200 and $500. In 1910, the company added a field grade, the Fox Sterlingworth, which listed for $35.

Ansley H. Fox was the driving force in the creation of the company and became the president and general manager upon its incorporation. He garnered a decade of experience in the design, manufacture and marketing of double shotguns at the Fox Gun Company of Baltimore and the Philadelphia Arms Company. And he brought unlimited confidence and an ability to attract wealthy investors.

The Foreward of the 1909 A.H. Fox Gun Co. catalog provides insight into Ansley Fox's vision:

"The genuine A.H. Fox Gun is 'The Finest Gun in the World.' No gun ever made equals it in simplicity and strength, quality or workmanship. No amount of labor or expense is spared to make it perfect. The best mechanical principles known in gun making have been combined with the finest workmanship and material obtainable, absolutely regardless of cost. The A.H. Fox Gun has fewer parts in its mechanism than any other double hammerless gun...the frame, which contains the working parts, is about one-half pound lighter than the average gun frame. This permits beautiful lines of proportion, superb balance and quick handling...."

The statement also foreshadows the conflict between the perfection he wanted to achieve and what was possible in the real world. His investors and board members were successful businessmen. They understood the impossibility of sparing "no amount of expense or labor" to make a product perfect, or of using the "finest materials available, absolutely regardless of cost," while still being able to sell that product at a price that was competitive yet would generate a profit.

Ansley Fox did not understand, or if he did would not act on it. Among the most significant clashes was whether or not to add a field-grade gun, the Sterlingworth, to the product line. Ansley Fox was initially opposed, on the grounds that it would diminish the Fox brand. The board insisted. The conflict between the designer's quest for perfection and the reality of the marketplace was not resolved until 1912. Income from sales failed to cover operating costs, debt obligations could not be met and the bankrupt company went into receivership. Ansley Fox was dismissed.

The company was acquired by one of its major investors who put it on a path toward financial stability. The new leadership strengthened the marketing of the Fox Sterlingworth, which was selling twice as many guns as the combined sales of the graded guns, and in 1912 the company began manufacturing 16- and 20-gauge guns.

The new leadership also began the sustained task of reducing costs, beginning with engraving. As Michael McIntosh explains in *Best Guns*:

"The reason is obvious: Fox never raised its prices much, but the cost of labor and materials escalated steadily, and the only way to survive in those circumstances is to reduce the amount of time spent on each gun. So, by 1914, the delicate scroll that earlier graced all the high-grade Foxes had, except in CE grade, given way to a bolder, Germanic style of deep-relief chiseling that could be done well in much less time."

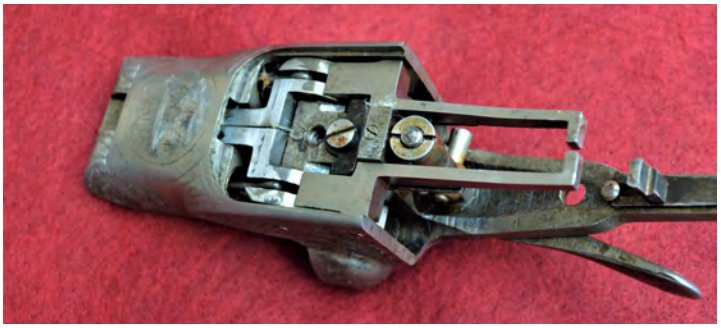
The quality of wood also began to drop off after 1913, a decline that accelerated in the 1920s. Krupp steel barrels were replaced with Belgian-made Chromox fluid-steel barrels. In the early 1920s, Fox started using cyanide on receivers to

approximate the beautiful colors that were a by-product of the traditional process of case-hardening. This decision reduced production costs, but the trade-off was giving up case-hardened steel's resistance to corrosion and wear. Also, cyanide-induced color wears off relatively quickly.

None of these changes seem to have diminished the shooting qualities of the later guns. Nevertheless, a prospective buyer of a Fox should be aware of them. Craig Larter, in his 2012 *Double Gun Journal* article, "A.H. Fox C-Grade: A Great Choice for the Shooter and Collector," provides the definitive analysis of the differences between the early and the later Grade C guns. His overall assessment was that "Post-1913 Fox guns are very worthy shooters and collectibles, but they do not equal the quality of the early guns in the opinion of most collectors."

If Ansley Fox did not design the A.H. Fox gun to attract a specific type of shooter, other than he be rich, what did shape his image of what the perfect shotgun should be? One possible answer is his experience as a professional shooter from 1900 to 1902, during which many of his successes were in the pigeon ring.

Whether by intent or good luck, Ansley Fox designed a superb game gun just as interest in upland bird hunting among America's affluent sportsmen was about to take off.



The resulting increase in demand for sub-caliber doubles played to one of Fox's post-1912 strengths. The invention of skeet increased demand for guns in all gauges that were attractive, light and handled well. The introduction of sporting clays six decades later expanded that demand exponentially.

The Grade C Gun

The A.H. Fox Company manufactured about 3,400 Grade C shotguns, 2,700 in 12 gauge and 700 in 16 and 20 gauge. Of the 12-gauge guns, about 55 percent were made before 1913. Grade C guns represent about 2 1/2 percent of total production.

The 12-gauge Grade CE depicted in this article was manufactured in 1920. Its ejectors added $15 to the standard $100 list price. It weighs 7 pounds, 8 ounces. The length of pull is 14 inches, the drop at comb is 1 3/4 inches and the crop at heel is 2 3/4 inches.

Locks: The Fox boxlock is, as advertised, simple, reliable and sturdy. However, its design is not as unique as described in the company's catalogs and advertisements. Since 1888, Parker Brothers had been using coil springs and Hunter Arms a rotary bolt-locking mechanism. Ithaca believed Fox hammers were so similar to its own that it filed an unsuccessful patent infringement claim. As the last American company to enter the market, Fox had the opportunity to take the best ideas, improve them slightly and package them nicely.

Fox advertised its boxlock as being lighter and more compact than those of its competitors. This receiver with its trigger plate weighs 1 pound, 14 1/2 ounces, which is identical to the Ithaca No. 4. One visually distinguishing feature of the Fox boxlock is the coil-spring mechanism that powers the top lever.

Stock: The stock on this gun is made of grained English walnut. Because the wood is dense and has good grain alignment, it is a strong stock. Its negatives are monochrome tonality, the light-colored grain and an absence of figure. The blank probably would have been graded out as a one on a scale of zero to six.

Barrels: The 30-inch Chromox fluid-steel barrels have 2 5/8-inch chambers and weigh 3 pounds, 14 ounces. Of the six fourth-quality guns, the Fox Grade C is the only one with engraving on the barrels, which adds elegance.

Engraving: The fact that Grade C guns were the only grade that retained the English-scroll and game-scene style after 1913 suggests that Fox considered it the flagship gun. The sides of the frame show upland gamebirds, the bottom a hunting dog in an upland game setting. Coverage is 80 to 90 percent. The scrolls are fine and deeply cut. The overall effect is compelling.

Price and Availability Today: Grade C Foxes are generally available, but at a steep price. The 2022 *BBGV* lists a retail value of $3,500 for Grade CE 12-gauge guns graded at 70 percent. The trend has been flat since 2018, which saw a $650 drop from 2017.

From 2018 through 2022, RIAC's Premier Firearms Actions sold four A.H. Fox Co. 12-gauge Grade C guns; the median sale price was $4,600.

Twelve Grade CE guns were advertised on GI at the end of 2022; the median list price was $7,000.

The L.C. Smith No. 3

"OUR No. 3 gun has for years been a great favorite, and since we have equipped it with our famous Nitro Steel barrels it is considered by many to be the finest medium-grade gun on the market. The No. 3 always pleases as in it we give so much of value."

— Hunter Arms Co. 1906 L.C. Smith Guns Catalog

Vision and History

From 1890 through 1912, Hunter Arms produced about 115,000 L.C. Smith hammerless doubles. The No. 0, listed for $47. The fourth-quality level gun, the No. 3, listed for $100. The seven higher grades ranged in price from $150 to $750.

In 1913, Hunter Arms brought out a new line of L.C. Smith hammerless shotguns. The primary motivation for the design changes was to reduce production costs. In 1917, Hunter Arms Co. was purchased by a consortium of local businessmen. The company continued to manufacture the post-1913 line of L.C. Smith guns until 1945, when it was acquired by Marlin Firearms Co.

The characteristics of the hammerless guns introduced by Hunter Arms in the early 1890s relied heavily on designs developed at L.C. Smith Syracuse a couple of years before it was sold. The last Syracuse catalog states that the design process was driven by trying to avoid the "mistakes" of existing hammerless doubles. The list of mistakes starts with the frames, including their "ungainly proportions," "structural weakness" and "short length." Another objectional feature to be overcome was "the complication of mechanisms employed, consisting of numerous small springs and small parts always liable to break." The solution was to design a gun based on "Simplicity, Reliability and Ease of Manipulation." Essentially, L.C. Smith hammerless guns were designed not to be boxlocks.

The Hunter Arms 1892 catalog begins with a letter: "To The Public." It states: "The immense popularity of our gun is largely due to its strength and durability...as demonstrated by years of constant service at the trap, and in the field."

In the many testimonials presented in the catalog, common phrases used in praise of the L.C. Smith hammerless were "simplicity, durability and shooting qualities," "a gun for all purposes" and "the best all-around gun." These testimonials were, of course, carefully selected by Hunter Arms to attract sportsmen who valued those traits and became the company's primary market.

The L.C. Smith hammerless was the only sidelock among the premier brands. For Hunter Arms, differentiating its hammerless double from competitors' boxlocks would not be a problem. However, in terms of trade-offs necessary to maintain quality and still to compete at the same price points, Hunter Arms faced a major challenge. Sidelocks are inherently more expensive to build than boxlocks.

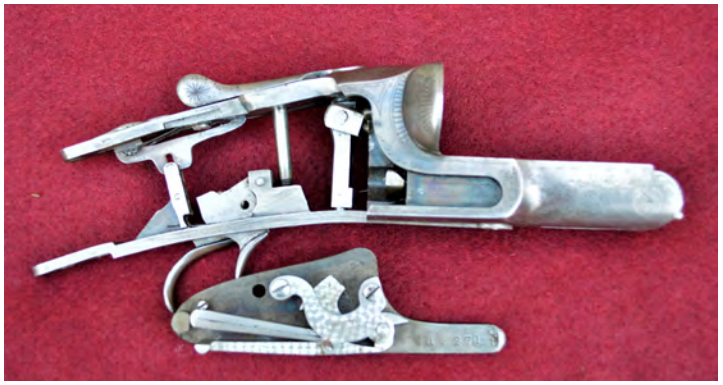
The men who designed and built the L.C. Smith hammerless gun accomplished what they set out to do. They saw an opportunity to dominate a segment of the hammerless gun market that included sportsmen who admired the beautiful lines of a sidelock but could not afford or did not want a British gun. It also included those who were more interested in owning a versatile gun that shot reasonably well for them in different venues than a shotgun that could maximize their performance in one or two.

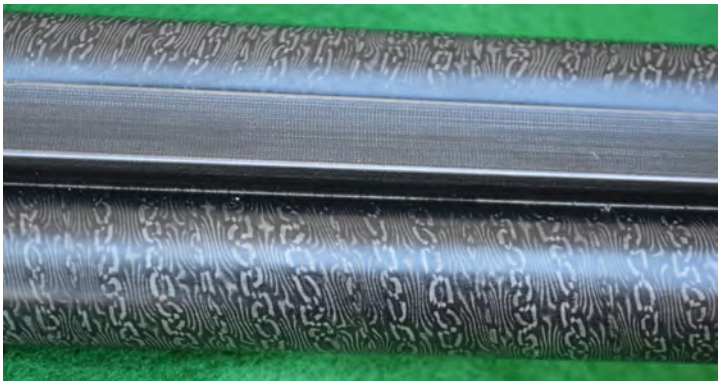
That turned out to be a large segment of the market for double-barrel shotguns from 1890 to 1913. And it remains so today among those interested in shooting classic doubles.

The No. 3 Gun

Hunter Arms manufactured some 3,050 No. 3 shotguns. This was 2.6 percent of its total production and was only 450 guns shy of the combined production of the seven higher L.C. Smith grades. Eighty-five percent of No. 3 guns were 12-gauge. Production peaked in 1907 at 349 guns.

The 12-gauge No. 3E shown in this article was manufactured in 1912. It has 32-inch barrels and weighs 7 pounds, 5 ounces. The length of pull is 14 1/4 inches, the drop at comb is 1 5/8-inch; and the drop at heel is 2 5/8 inches. Its ejectors added $15 to the standard $100 list price.





Locks: The back-action sidelocks are, as advertised, simple and strong. One downside of their simplitcity, however, is the absence of a sear spring. Hence, the mainspring has to perform two different functions, leaving both somewhat degraded. The receiver and barrels are secured by a rotary bolting system in which the bolt goes through the top rib extension. The hammer cocking rods engage when the gun is opened. One peculiarity to L.C. Smith guns is that if the hammers are not cocked, the forearm cannot be attached.

The safety mechanism is the least robust among the premier hammerless guns. It is unique in that it has three positions; a gun is only safe in the middle position. The rear position, which does not allow the automatic safety to engage, was designed to appeal to trap shooters. However, for hunters the three-position safety adds a level of uncertainty. In heavy cover the vegetation can pull or push the gun off of "safe," thus the safety position has to be checked frequently. The receiver is sleek, 1 1/2 inches wide and 8 1/4 inches long to the rear of the tang. With both sidelocks mounted, it weighs 2 pounds, 2 ounces.

Stock: The stock on this gun is made of nicely grained English walnut. The dark grain across the top half of the stock gives good contrast. More significant from a structural perspective, it flows uninterrupted from the butt through the wrist and into the stock head. The background has some variation in color and highlighting. Moreover, the opposite side of the stock is similar, although less defined. The principal negative is the absence of figure. The blank used to make this stock would have been graded as a three.

Barrels: The barrels are made of fine Damascus steel in the popular chain-link pattern. These 32-inch barrels weigh only 3 pounds, 6 ounces. This is three ounces less than the 30-inch Krupp fluid-steel barrels on the Ithaca No. 4 and eight ounces less than the 30-inch Chromox fluid-steel barrels on the Fox C Grade. The chambers are 2 3/4-inch. The right barrel is choked full and the left extra full.

Engraving: Finely cut upland game vignettes cover roughly half of the sidelocks. On this gun both sides are similarly engraved. Engraving patterns varied somewhat over time. For example, in 1906, the left lock depicted upland game and the right a duck on water; both enclosed within an oval. The frame has line engraving and scattered, loose scroll work.

The description of No. 3 engraving in the 1906 L.C. Smith catalog reads: "The engraving is appropriate for a gun to be used either in the brush or at the trap." One possible explanation for this non-description is that the company thought the copy space more valuable if used to reinforce its marketing theme that an L.C. Smith was a shotgun for all purposes.

Price and Availability Today: The 2022 *BBGV* reports a retail value of $3,000 for 12-gauge No. 3E guns in 70 percent condition. The five-year trend has been flat. There is moderate availability. From 2018 through 2022, three 12-gauge No. 3E guns were sold at RIAC's Premier Firearms Actions; the median realized price was $2,185. At the end of 2022, seven were listed on GI; the median asking price was $4,250.

In the November/December issue, Wesbrook will cover Parker Brothers DH Grade, Lefever Arms E Grade and Remington Model 1894 D Grade shotguns. ■