

# GETTING

The way to the American West was blazed by men; explorers, mountain men, scouts, farmers, and soldiers, carrying long guns as a primary defensive weapon and food-gathering tool. The handgun, be it single-shot, muzzleloading, or revolver, was a last resort, close quarters, self-defense firearm that owes most if not all of its contemporary popularity and romanticism to books, films, and television programs of the last 50 or 60 years. While the sixgun that came West with the thousands of immigrants did play a significant roll in the taming of the West, it was the rifle and the shotgun that helped civilize the frontier and put food on the table.

By the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Western expansion, there were at least three safe, reliable, and accurate lever-action rifles available to American consumers if they had the monetary wherewithal to purchase one. In March of 1860, the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company in Boston, Mass. patented their first lever-actuated rifle, which was tested and endorsed by President Lincoln personally for use by the Union soldiers during the Civil War. The year 1860 also saw the arrival of the first of a long line of long guns from Oliver Winchester's company, this one carrying the name of Henry in honor of the man whose significant changes to the Volcanic carbine made the 1860 Henry so successful, Benjamin Henry. This was the first functional self-loading, self-cocking, magazine-fed rifle and fired the .44 Henry cartridge that, while not a real powerhouse, was sufficient to stop a man or bring down a deer and gave the added advantage of numerous follow-up shots.

It wasn't long before Winchester modified the Henry with the new King's patented side-loading gate and a wood fore arm, which protected the shooter's supporting hand from getting burned, and for the first time, utilizing the Winchester name plate, calling it the Model 1866 or as it was commonly known, the Yellowboy. By 1873, there was another new kid on the block, the Winchester Model 1873 which employed "central fire" priming and chambered initially in .44 Winchester Center Fire (WCF) and later in other new, hard-hitting cartridges.

Through all these changes and modifications, the rifle became more reliable, powerful, plentiful, accurate, and affordable. When forced to make a choice between a rifle and a handgun, any right thinking settler, rancher, or farmer would take the rifle every time. Even in a life or death struggle, the long gun was the weapon of choice due to its accuracy and power at longer distances. Yes, the sixgun may hold our imagination, but the rifle brought home the bacon.

Due in no small part to cowboy action shooting and the broad interest of not just guns but all things Old West, today's shooter, CAS participant or not, has access to more, usually better built, safer, and more accurate long guns than ever before in history. And, in comparable dollars, less expensive. For the first time CAS buyer, trying to choose that just-right rifle at an affordable price can be a daunting challenge. Hopefully, we can help steer you along in the right direction when making that all-important purchase. Just remember, the good news is that you only need one to compete in cowboy action shooting.

# R I F

By: Smith n' Jones

Top: Puma stainless finish in .357 Magnum, Bottom: Davidson's Limited Edition '92 Winchester in .32-20



# STARTED

By the time I had finally made the decision to make the leap onto cowboy action shooting, I had just purchased a new Winchester M-94 Trapper chambered in .357 Magnum. At the time I thought that it would make a great little Mule deer gun to carry around in my pickup and be cheap to plink with or to chase ground squirrels. I immediately had a problem with that cute little Winchester in the form of a broken lifter and while getting that repaired, I asked the gunsmith to try to smooth up the action. When I got it back I was not very satisfied with the work and due to the fact that I was getting into CAS, I traded it for a Marlin Cowboy .45 Colt. This was the first Cowboy I had ever seen and the gun storeowner claimed it was the first one in Boise. Probably wasn't true but a good selling point that worked. Out of the box, that Marlin had a great action and crisp trigger pull that forced me to pay the ridiculous price the gun store wanted. I did it and I have never regretted it. The rifle was strong, accurate, and looked great. I was happy.

That was just the first of many rifle purchases and the one I remember the most. I was working, still had a kid at home and not a lot of money to throw around. It wasn't the smartest deal I ever cut, but I was satisfied.

My advice to today's first-time rifle buyer is the same as for your handguns, take your time, compare, evaluate, and hunt for a bargain whether looking for a new or a used gun. Once you have made the decision to buy your first rifle, follow the same advice. Try out as

many different models, calibers, and styles as you possibly can. Go to the range, or better yet, to a few CAS meets, introduce yourself, and ask if you can try some of the rifles being used there. Just about any club match you attend will have lots of folks more than willing to loan you their pet rifle and some ammo to try. Listen to the arguments for and against certain models, and make the best, most informed decision you can. And, a word of warning. When you do decide what to buy, don't expect an out-of-the-box gun to work as smoothly as the tricked-out one you borrowed at the range. Not likely to happen. But the basic gun will be the same and after-market work can be done later. The overriding question is also the same as it was for hand guns. New or used?

You will find that new rifle prices are pretty static. There isn't a big profit margin in any new gun, so the price of say a Taylor's '73 .357 in your home town will probably be within a few dollars of the same gun anywhere else in the nation. The make and model rifle you choose, however, can make a significant difference in how much you pay. On the low price end will be the many variations of the Replica Winchester 1892. Most of these guns (not all) are made in Brazil and are exported under a number of different names including Rossi, Puma, EMF, and others. These are very good, quality guns and are built to withstand a lot of use and abuse. Typically, the actions are rough with a trigger pull weight that is heavier than needed or wanted. Still, the price is usually very reasonable and some judicious smoothing and tuning by a competent

# ILIES





A Marlin for any CAS category. Top: .32 H&R, Middle: Cowboy in .45 Colt, Bottom: Cowboy Comp in .357

gunsmith will make them very serviceable. Prices will run anywhere from about \$300 to \$500 for a new '92, depending on the make model and finish. Then there are the Winchester replicas, predominantly manufactured in Italy. From the replica 1860 Henry and its close cousin the 1866 Yellowboy, to the 1873 "Gun that Won the West", these fine examples of the gun maker's craft make a significant jump in the suggested retail price. The fact of the matter is that even the most basic 20" round barrel carbine retails for somewhere around \$750 to \$800 and the fancier models can run \$1000 or more.

The other two significant players in the new levergun market are Marlin Firearms and Winchester Repeating Arms. Both companies list their contemporary market leverguns as model 1894s, but that is where the similarity ends. Marlin has had its M-94 in continuous production for over 110 years, chambered in what we refer to as pistol cartridges. Very popular on the CAS circuit, the Marlin '94 is a strong, reliable, and accurate rifle with a great reputation. CAS appropriate rifles from Marlin include the M-1894 CS, the Cowboy, the Cowboy II, and the various Cowboy Comp models. The price for the basic CS model is at the \$350 to \$400 range and the Comp models run well into the \$700 to \$800 range. Winchester's M-94 was originally chambered only in full-length rifle cartridges but has been available in some pistol calibers for over 25 years. A strong and reliable gun, the model '94 in a standard configuration will set you back about \$350 to \$400.

On the other hand, the used rifle market is usually much more palatable to folks just getting into the game and, as with all used markets, there are good deals to be found and some not so good. Gun shows and personal ads in your local newspaper usually provide the best price opportunities. I have picked up Winchester M-94s in fairly good shape for as little as \$200 and modern production Marlin '94s for as little as \$250. The biggest problem, at least in my local market, is that as the popularity of CAS has grown, the asking price for used cowboy guns has gone up significantly.

As with the sixguns, the two rifle markets, new and used, each have their strong and weak points. The new rifle purchaser can look forward

to getting a pretty good guarantee from the manufacturer and/or importer that says any defects and problems with the new gun will be taken care of. The down side is that the price is likely to be significantly higher than a used firearm. Used guns, on the other hand, are going to be somewhat less expensive, but the down side is that unless you make your purchase at a used gun shop, any repairs that are needed after the transaction will be the new owner's responsibility. Still, if the price is right, this can be something of a bargain. Usually, problems that need immediate attention will be minor in nature and not all that expensive. Action jobs will most likely be needed in either case and any feeding

problems noticed can usually be taken care of at that time. Poor accuracy in any rifle is usually more of a cleaning/maintenance problem than an actual defect in the firearm. The chamber pressures of most cowboy action loads are so low as to make it nearly impossible to damage a barrel, unless there is an obstruction in the barrel and the end results of that situation are usually very obvious. Typically, if a cowboy rifle is shooting erratically and will not group inside three or four inches at 25 yards, the barrel is dirty, leaded, and in need of a good scrubbing with a brush and quality solvent. Any time you are seriously thinking about buying a rifle or revolver, take a bore light with you and take a look down the barrel at the riflings. If they are not clean and bright, you should ask the owner to run a brush and patch through the barrel and see what is under the crud. If the grooves and lands are sharp and unpitted, then the barrel is most likely a good one. And when we talk about accuracy for CAS shooting, we are not talking about minute-of-angle capability. If your rifle will shoot within a couple of inches at 25 yards it is sufficiently accurate for our game.

Purchasing your first CAS rifle doesn't have to be a difficult operation, just take your time and do a lot of research and looking. The greatest assets you will have are the good CAS folks who shoot each month at your local range. They are always willing to help. If by chance you live in an area where there are no local cowboy clubs close by, you can still get a lot of good information online, including the SASS Wire and similar sites. Just a word of caution. When you ask a question in a forum like the above mentioned, remember that you will get a lot of "expert" opinions, and they are just that until you get hands-on proof. Call a friend, a relative, or call us here at **SHOOT! MAGAZINE**. Who knows, you might just get some real, honest-to-goodness, good advice.

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Cimarron Yellow Boy (1866) .44 Special