



The toys for the **BLACK STUFF**

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The only type of handgun you can legally shoot is a muzzle-loader. But they were good enough for The Man with No Name (left) and real Western heroes such as the Texan Rangers. **Wild Bill Harriman** saddles up and explains how to get started

YOU'VE doubtless heard the term Spaghetti Western. It's not just applicable to cowboy films, though. The Italian firearms industry leads the world when it comes to making replica Wild West guns, particularly percussion revolvers. Since John Major and Michael Howard banned pistol-shooting after Dunblane, muzzle-loading pistols are now the only type of handgun that you can legally shoot. Most replica revolvers are so well made that they are now collected in their own right. They are very much cheaper than the originals and they guarantee you'll have no chance of ruining a valuable antique by shooting it.

All the Colt models are reproduced, ranging from the tiny Model 1855 Root sidehammer to the mighty Colt Walker which weighs 4lb. If you fancy something other than a Colt then choose from the products of Messrs Remington, Spiller & Burr, Rogers & Spencer, LeMat, Dance Bros or Starr. Revolver carbines or rifles are also available. My personal choice is the Remington New Model Army; it's a better and stronger design than the Colt. It's not surprising that it was the second most-used revolver of the American Civil War (1861–1865).

The Mecca for black powder shooters is Henry Krank & Co of Pudsey, near Leeds (www.henrykrank.com). If Krank's doesn't stock it, you probably don't need it. The Royal Armouries is just down the road, so you may be able see the real thing during your shopping trip.

CAST YOUR BULLETS

You need a firearm certificate to own a replica revolver and to get one you must be a member of a Home Office-approved muzzle-loading pistol club. Membership of the Muzzle Loaders Association of Great Britain (MLAGB) is a must (<http://mlagb.com>). The MLAGB has an excellent regional branch structure and you will find a warm welcome from enthusiastic and delightfully eccentric people. The association has its own range at Wedgnock near Coventry and a wonderful Victorian clubhouse at Bisley.

You will also need an explosives certificate from the police to buy gunpowder and a recipient competent authority document from the Health and Safety Executive to transport it. Powder should be stored in a locked, fire-resistant, wooden box; go to www.basc.org.uk and type "explosives guide" in the search box for details. Percussion caps should be stored away from damp, heat and little fingers. You can either buy ready-made bullets or cast your own from a mould. Scrap lead is readily available and can be melted over a fire or on a



For *A Fistful of Dollars* (left) you can have a Spiller & Burr replica (top left). The Colt 1855 sidehammer (top right) would cost more but enhance outlaw fantasies (below). Whatever you choose, you'll need a powder box (above)



gas stove. A pair of heatproof cook's gauntlets is a good investment as the mould becomes very hot.

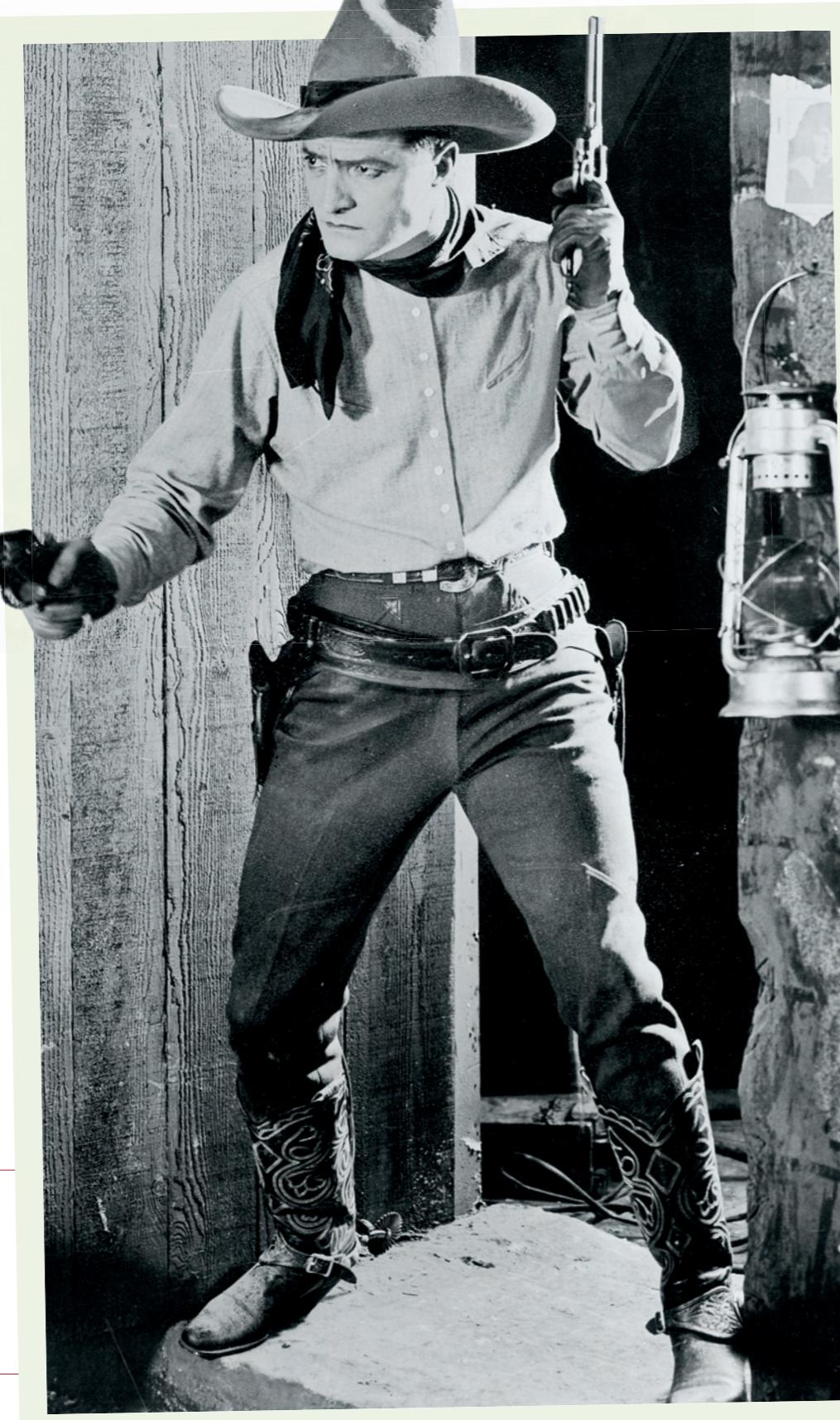
Loading a percussion revolver is not very difficult. Pull the hammer back to half-cock so that the cylinder will rotate freely. Next, pour a measure of powder from your flask into one chamber. Rotate the cylinder so the chamber is in line with the rammer. Place a ball in the mouth of the chamber and seat it on top of the powder with the rammer. Be careful not to crush the powder charge. Repeat this operation until all of the chambers are loaded. Using a lolly stick or similar implement spread lubricant grease (Trex baking fat is ideal) over the front of the cylinder. The idea is to seal all of the chambers in case the flash from one sets off its neighbours – a rare occurrence called a "chain fire". The pistol mimics a Roman candle with all the charges going off at once. At best, a chain fire will damage your revolver; at worst, it may damage you. The next job is to cap the pistol. This should be done only on the order of the range conducting officer and with the pistol pointing down range. Place a percussion cap on each of the nipples and seat it with your thumb. Add hearing and eye protection and you're ready to fire.

Decide which shooting stance to use. A modern, double-handed grip gives rigidity and improves accuracy but looks odd when used with old pistols. The duelling position, with its extended arm and tucked-in head, is serviceable but I prefer the stance developed by Walter Winans, the doyen of Victorian pistol-shooters. The pistol arm is bent so that ➤





Double-gunner:
Tom Mix in *The Untamed* (below);
replica 1858 Starr
double-action
by Pietta (left);
replica Colt Root
sidehammer by
Palmetto (right)



the upper arm is pressed against the torso for stability. The head needs to be inclined to use the sights and the other hand is tucked into the trouser pocket. It may sound like contortionism but is very effective when mastered.

WHITE SMOKE

When you are ready to shoot, pull the hammer to full-cock, take aim and pull the trigger. If you have loaded the pistol properly there will be a *kerboom*, some gentle recoil and a cloud of sulphurous white smoke. There may also be a neat hole in the scoring zone of the target. The sights on most percussion revolvers are rudimentary, so don't expect match accuracy. Those on Colts are particularly bad – the rear sight notch is cut into the hammer nose. You can buy a percussion revolver fitted with adjustable target sights but these are inauthentic and look out of place. In any case, I think that these revolvers need to be shot instinctively, as they would have been when used for real.

I find shooting at a traditional bull's-eye target tedious and prefer an anthropoid target such as the military Figure 11 or charging man. Corrugated cardboard from large boxes makes a good basis for a target and you don't need to be a Rembrandt to paint a passable presentation of a lawman, outlaw, Billy Yank, Johnny Reb or whoever takes your fancy. Interactive targets such as balloons are a lot more fun than merely punching holes in paper. Cheese biscuits hung on fishing line are particularly testing. The winner is the person with the least biscuit left. (This is eco-friendly as birds and small animals will hoover up the remnants later.) When improvising targets, don't choose anything metallic as the bullets may ricochet.

Prompt cleaning is vital. Black powder fouling is hygroscopic and the resulting sulphuric acid corrodes. Hot water gets rid of most fouling; stubborn patches can be left to a proprietary black powder solvent. Make sure the pistol is completely dry and finish off with a water displacement spray such as WD 40. Avoid cleaning your pistol in the kitchen as the smell of sulphur will not make you popular.

My favourite revolvers are the Paterson Colt and the LeMat. The Paterson – named after Colt's first factory in New

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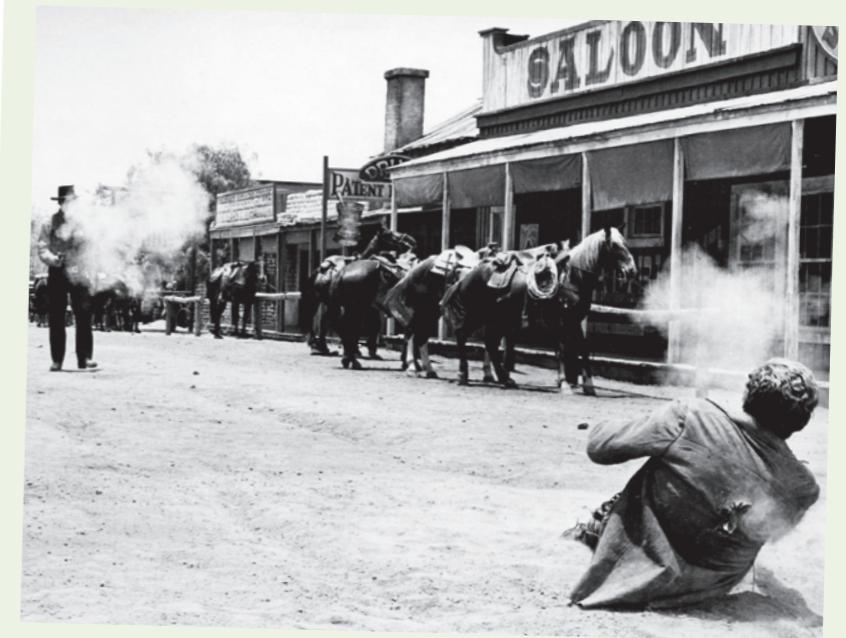


Jersey – was Colt's first successful pistol. Although it was one of the most important firearms ever built, it was fragile and not a commercial success; Colt went bust in 1842.

COLT ROMPS HOME

Back in 1838 the Texas Navy had bought 150 Paterson revolvers and these were eventually acquired by the Texas Rangers. In 1844, Captain Jack Hays and 14 other Rangers were ambushed by 70 Comanches along the Pedernales river near San Antonio. After the Rangers fired their single-shot rifles, the Comanches rushed in for the kill, knowing that these took a long time to reload. To their horror, the Rangers mounted and charged into them, firing their revolvers. Hays shouted for his men to “powder burn them, boys” and pursued the hapless braves for over three miles, killing as they went. By the time the Rangers' horses were blown, more than 30 Comanches lay dead. One Comanche war chief vowed never to lead his men against the Rangers whose pistols had “a shot for every finger of his hand”. Colt went on to huge success. Original Paterson colt revolvers cost a fortune but an inexpensive modern replica allows me to have an example of this famous gun in my collection.

For Dr Alexandre LeMat, firepower was the ultimate goal. His pistol had a nine-shot cylinder – most other revolvers



Firepower is the ultimate goal of the LeMat pistol with nine-shot cylinder (above left, replica). With a revolver you can play a Lawman (above) or a soldier of the Confederacy

had a mere five or six. If this were not enough, it also had a 16-bore barrel which fired a charge of buckshot when a catch on the hammer nose was released. This “grapeshot revolver” was a favourite within the Confederacy during the American Civil War although few got past the sea blockade from France or England where they were made. Firing the LeMat is an awesome experience; after nine shots and a charge of buckshot the target looks like it's been hit by an attack helicopter.

If, like me, you love American history, percussion-revolver shooting allows you to experience firsthand the firearms that shaped that nation. It's also pure escapism. With a Colt or Remington revolver in my hand I am transported back to the Civil War or the Old West and I can be any historical character that I like. Anyone except Annie Oakley that is; the skirt just wouldn't suit me.

“ ‘Powder burn them, boys,’ shouted the Texas Ranger captain as they pursued hapless Comanche braves for three miles, killing as they went ”

Replica Colt Walker by Armi San Marco. The original was developed from the Colt Paterson



HENRY KRANK CATALOGUE

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