

Derek Landers explores a reproduction of a rare version of the Henry rifle



When Benjamin Tyler Henry was tasked to come up with an improvement on the ammunition for the Volcanic rifle, little could he, or his employer, Oliver Winchester, have imagined that the fruits of his work would lead to the foundation of one of the legendary names in gun making. The .44 Henry flat rimfire cartridge, and the rifle that was built for it, heralded a line of lever-action rifles that continues to this day.

At the age of 16, Henry was apprenticed to a custom gun shop in Claremont, New Hampshire and then moved to another gunmaker in Windsor, Vermont. He spent some time working at the U.S. National Armoury in Springfield, Massachusetts before moving, in around 1842, to the armoury of Robbins, Kendal & Lawrence in Windsor. In 1857, he became plant supervisor at the New Haven Arms Company in Connecticut, owned by Oliver Winchester.

As the basis for his search for more powerful ammunition, he used the

.22 rimfire cartridge that had been developed by Daniel Wesson of Smith & Wesson fame. The result was a copper cased, .44 calibre rimfire cartridge containing 26-grains of powder behind a 216-grain, round-nosed lead bullet, said to develop a muzzle velocity of 1200fps. The bullet was later changed to a flat nose and reduced slightly in weight, becoming known as the 'Henry Flat'. This same cartridge was used throughout the production of the Henry rifle and the subsequent Winchester Model 1866, being assembled not only by the New Haven Arms Company themselves but over time by several other ammunition manufacturers.

To accommodate this new ammunition, Henry designed a new rifle, and he was granted a patent on October 6th, 1860, which was assigned to Oliver Winchester, with Henry producing the rifles as an inside contractor in the New Haven plant. He would receive no pay for his work but take a profit from all guns

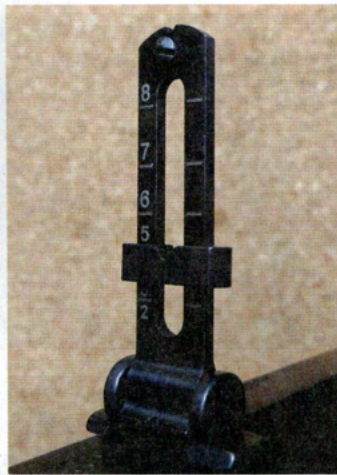
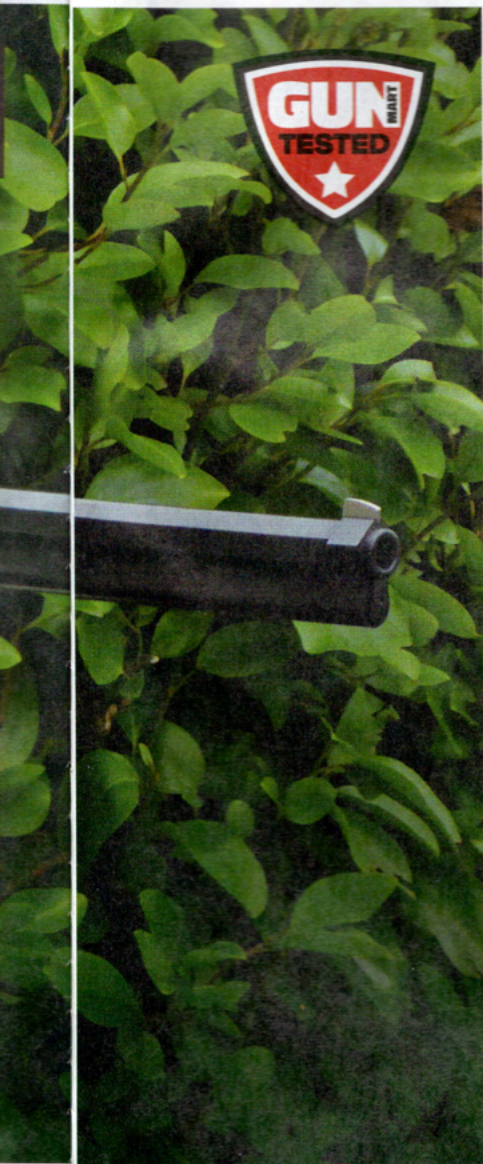
produced. This proved to be a wise move, as he received \$15,000 over the next five years, precisely double what he would have earned from his regular salary.

In 1864, when the new Winchester Repeating Arms Company moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, Henry decided to stay in New Haven, setting up a gun store and machine shop of his own. He remained there until he died in 1898.

The new rifle

Henry's rifle was, like its predecessors, lever-operated and fed from a tubular magazine below the barrel. In this case, the combined barrel/magazine is one piece. The magazine had a capacity of 15 and the rifle weighed around 9lbs. Early production trials were made with iron receivers and butt plates, but for whatever reason, they were dropped.

Standard wood for the stock was American walnut, with several deluxe models using rosewood. There



Rear sight raised. Note the markings



Rear sight down. Note the shape of the notch



A rounded top to the butt plate. Later it was more pointed



Some nice case colours on the receiver. Note the hammer

were minor variations in the shape of the stock, but they were generally produced with a hole in the butt and a sprung trapdoor in the butt plate, to accommodate a cleaning rod, with early rods being hickory and later steel. Years ago, I owned a Uberti with this feature, but I'm not sure if it is still available, and if it is, the rods will doubtless be an optional extra.

Rear sights were pretty much as found on this Uberti, but with early versions being marked to 1,000 yards, and without the retaining screw for the sliding elevator. Most early guns had the sight dovetail cut into the rear of the receiver, behind the ejection port, as well as the barrel allowing the user to place the rear sight where they found it most suitable. About one-quarter-way through production, the receiver dovetail was discontinued. Front sights started as a 'half-moon' blade but changed to the square back style that we have here.

Between mid-1863 and late 1865, the U.S. government purchased 1,731 Henry rifles, all of which were provided with loops for slings, one on the left side of the butt and the other halfway up the barrel on the same side, this feature becoming standard for the rest of production. Uberti has also recreated this feature in the past, and today it is listed as an option on their website. By contrast, in the same period, the Army bought around 100,000 Spencer carbines. One of the disadvantages of the Henry was its loaded weight of around 10lbs, with all of that being at the front end, making it particularly unsuitable for mounted troops. Also, the open slot in the bottom of the magazine tube was not ideal in battle conditions, where the ingress of dirt would cause a problem.

Estimates vary as to the number of Henry rifles made by the time production ceased, but it is generally accepted that the total was 13-14,000.

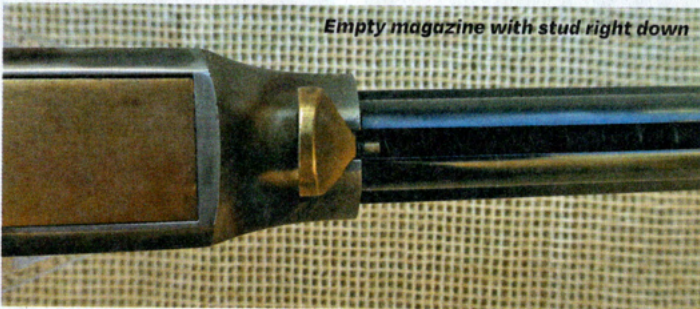
Attention to detail

I have had a love affair with the Henry rifle since I first saw a photograph on the front of a Uberti catalogue over 30 years ago, and I have owned several since then, with each one proving enjoyable to shoot, and this example is no different.

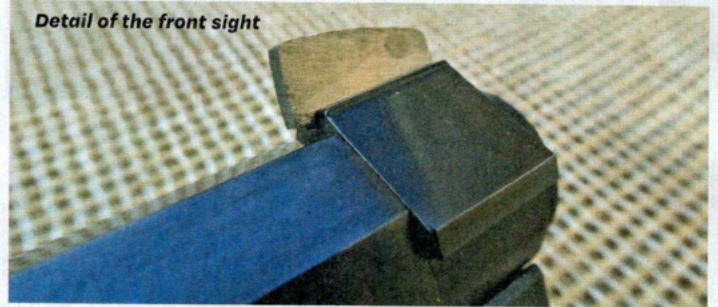
The one-piece barrel/magazine tube, which must have been a challenge to manufacture in 1860, is black, as well as the butt plate, with all edges being reasonably sharp. The receiver has an excellent mixture of colours, with the lever and hammer having the same finish. The stock has Uberti's normal gloss finish, with wood-to-metal fit being excellent, plus there are a couple of minor details that replicate the original early Henry rifles. The top of the butt plate is rounded, rather than the sharp crescent that appeared on later examples, and the bottom edge of the stock has a very slight curve, which collectors have termed a 'perch belly'. This was phased out as production



It's a very good-looking rifle



Empty magazine with stud right down



Detail of the front sight

progressed. This area may not be noticed by the casual observer but indicates Uberti's desire for authenticity.

Another feature of early production was the lack of a retaining catch for the loading lever, and this also has been copied in this reproduction, while the Uberti brass frames have the catch.

The front sight is a white metal blade that's fitted into a base machined as part of a collar, which is attached to the barrel via a small screw on the left side. The rear is a ladder with graduations marked from 2 to 8 for 100 yard increments, and there is a small screw at the top to keep the elevator from coming off the ladder. For 100 yards or less, the ladder is folded down and the base has a flat-based v-notch that mates very nicely with the front sight.

Quirky

The lack of a loading port on the receiver shows that this rifle loads a little differently when compared to normal lever-action guns. Turning the rifle upside down, you will see a small brass stud resting on the receiver. It is the magazine follower and is kept in place by the magazine spring. Grip this and push it towards the muzzle, and

when it gets as far as it will go, turn it sharply to the left. You can now release it and it will stay there, held in place by a small screw and exposing the open end of the magazine. A word of warning – the corner of that slit is very sharp, and it is just waiting for you to drag your thumb across it. Holding the rifle (still upside down) with the muzzle raised slightly, feed your cartridges in primer-end first. Now, grip the brass stud and push it towards the muzzle, then turn it to the right and slowly let it come back under the pressure of the spring. Do not let go of the stud until it comes to rest on the nose of the last cartridge in the magazine. Releasing the stud and letting it come down on its own has been known to cause a detonation in the magazine.

Smooth operator

With the caveat mentioned above, the user is advised to check primer seating depth and employ flat-pointed bullets for use in this rifle. As careful as you may be, there could possibly be a time when that stud just slips out of your fingers.

My load for indoor shooting is 8-grains of Unique powder behind a 250-grain RNFP lead bullet. This provides

light recoil and reasonable accuracy at 25 yards. The rifle was shooting a little to the right at this distance, but I did not move the sights, just used a bit of 'Kentucky windage' to alter the point of impact. The gun was consistently printing 5-shot groups of 2" or below, so more than adequate for CAS shooting.

Feed and extraction were faultless, and the toggle link system of these rifles is so smooth and light in operation. The shooter needs to be aware that the brass stud moves back one cartridge length towards the receiver each time you operate the lever. Therefore, particularly in a competition where you are looking at speed, leave a gap between your thumb, forefinger, and the magazine tube, to allow it to pass through.

For those who may like a little more bling and prefer the brass receiver, that model is around £100 cheaper than this steel version. Whichever one you choose, you will have a lot of fun and find others on the shooting line taking an interest in something just a little bit different.



Magazine loaded with five rounds. Note the stud position

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Name: Uberti Henry Rifle (Steel)

Calibre: .45 Colt

Barrel Length: 24.25"

Overall Length: 44"

Weight: 9.1 lbs

Length of Pull: 13"

Price: £1381.00

Contact: Henry Kranks - www.henrykrank.com