

The Man Behind the Guns That Won the West

By RITA REIF

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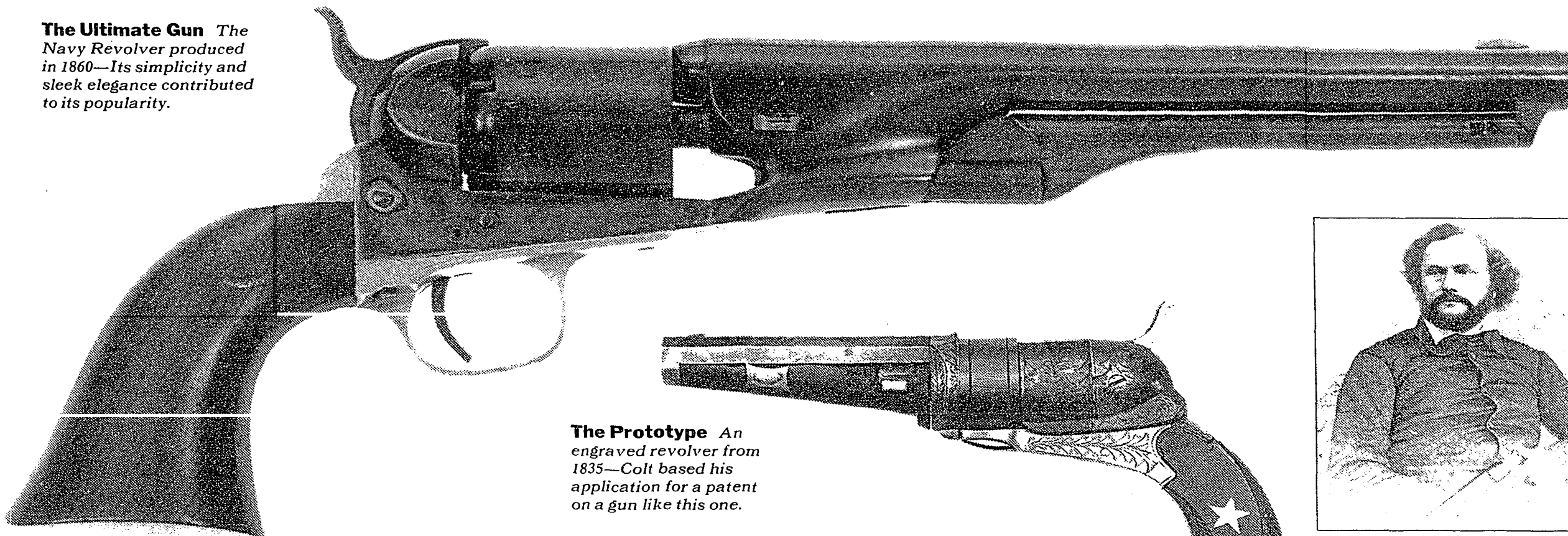
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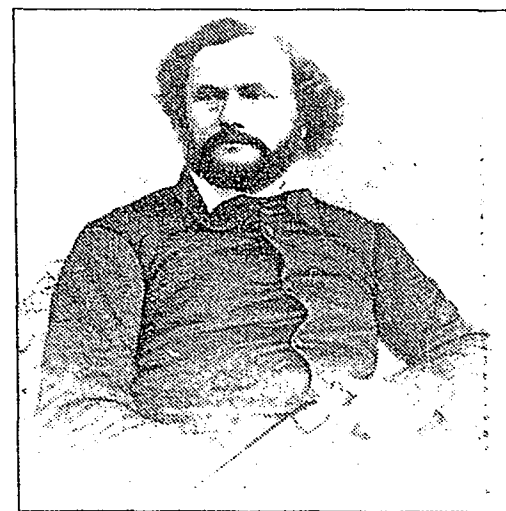
ARTS / ARTIFACTS

The Man Behind the Guns That Won the West

The Ultimate Gun *The Navy Revolver produced in 1860—Its simplicity and sleek elegance contributed to its popularity.*



The Prototype *An engraved revolver from 1835—Colt based his application for a patent on a gun like this one.*



The Inventor *Samuel Colt, in 1854—A gun maker with marketing savvy.*

By RITA REIF

SAMUEL COLT, THE INVENTOR of the most widely used gun in the Old West, was the consummate huckster. When he married Elizabeth Hart in 1856, he turned the wedding into an advertising opportunity, trimming the six-foot-tall wedding cake with sugar pistols and rifles and topping it off with a rearing colt.

"Colt was a master of illusion and among the first American industrialists to exploit the cult of personality to market his product," said William Hosley, curator of American decorative arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum here. "But he was also a genius who produced a revolver that became the world's first practical repeating firearm."

Colt played a significant role in the industrial revolution. His story is told at the Wadsworth Atheneum in "Sam and Elizabeth: Legend and Legacy of Colt's Empire," an exhibition of the guns Colt made or

collected and the art the couple owned.

The show, which runs through March 8, includes the wooden model of his most famous invention, the mechanism that gives the revolver its name. According to Colt, he was 16 when he whittled the spool-shaped, six-chambered device that rotates a fresh round into place each time the gun is cocked. As a willful teen-ager, he had been sent to sea for a year by his family to learn discipline and was aboard the ship *Corvo* en route to Calcutta when he made the model.

The earliest of the 49 Colt firearms in the show is a handsomely engraved revolver from 1835. Mr. Hosley said it was the type of gun that Colt used to apply for a patent a year later. With 36 moving parts, the pistol was far less sophisticated than what Colt considered his ultimate gun, the Navy Revolver he produced in 1860: it had only seven moving parts. Its simplicity and sleek elegance made it one of the most successful in history: 215,000 were sold over 23 years.

Colt, who was born in Hartford in 1814 and died there in 1862, boasted that he was a self-made man. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Colt, a Massachusetts blacksmith fa-

mous for his axes, also died young. His other grandfather, John Caldwell, a banker who made a fortune in West Indian trade, disowned Colt's family after Colt's mother died when he was seven. Later Colt's father, Christopher, struggled to support the family as a sales agent for a textile mill.

Samuel Colt was sent to live with an aunt in Hadley, Mass., where he attended Hopkins Academy and later the nearby Amherst Academy and was probably thrown out of both. He worked briefly in the mill in neighboring Ware with his father, and then went to sea. On Colt's return to Hartford, he produced his first actual gun models and was granted a patent in 1836. Seeking financial backing, he also became involved in gun-making businesses in Baltimore and Paterson, N.J., but they failed.

His fortunes improved slightly, however, in the 1840's while he lived in New York City. There, he collaborated with Samuel F. B. Morse on an underwater electric cable and, on his own, invented waterproof cloth cartridges for ammunition and a harbor defense system of underwater mines.

But all the while, guns were on his mind.

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At the time, most guns were still being made by hand, a process in which one craftsman performed as many as 200 tasks. Colt was convinced that machines could be adapted to perform those functions, but the cost of such machines was prohibitive.

In 1855, Colt built a factory in Hartford where he became the first to mass-produce gun parts using steam-powered, belt-driven machines. His factory saved time and money by using interchangeable parts and a rigid division of labor.

"There was a chorus line of machines, a maze of equipment, and each person worked on a single part," Mr. Hosley said. "Then all the components produced by machines were assembled elsewhere in the factory. Today's historians regard his Hartford gun factory as the prototype for America's industrial revolution."

Part of Colt's genius, Mr. Hosley said, was his grasp of industrialization and market-

ing. "You had to be able to sell huge quantities of guns to justify the cost of the machines," he said. "And if you don't have a market, you can't produce on that level." Colt's best-selling gun was a .31-caliber pocket pistol, at \$10 one of the cheapest he ever produced. Over 20 years 325,000 of them were sold.

COLT'S PROMOTIONAL SAVVY is also displayed in the show in the lithographs and prints that he commissioned or inspired. He hired the painter George Catlin, for example, to depict Colt guns in his hunting scenes, which were translated into lithographs that sold in the thousands. Colt guns also appeared in Currier & Ives prints.

Colt's mass-produced revolvers caused ripples throughout the industrial world. "The particular needs of gun making changed the way everything was manufactured, from sewing machines to typewriters, bicycles and automobiles," Mr. Hosley said. "And Connecticut Valley became yesterday's Silicon Valley." □