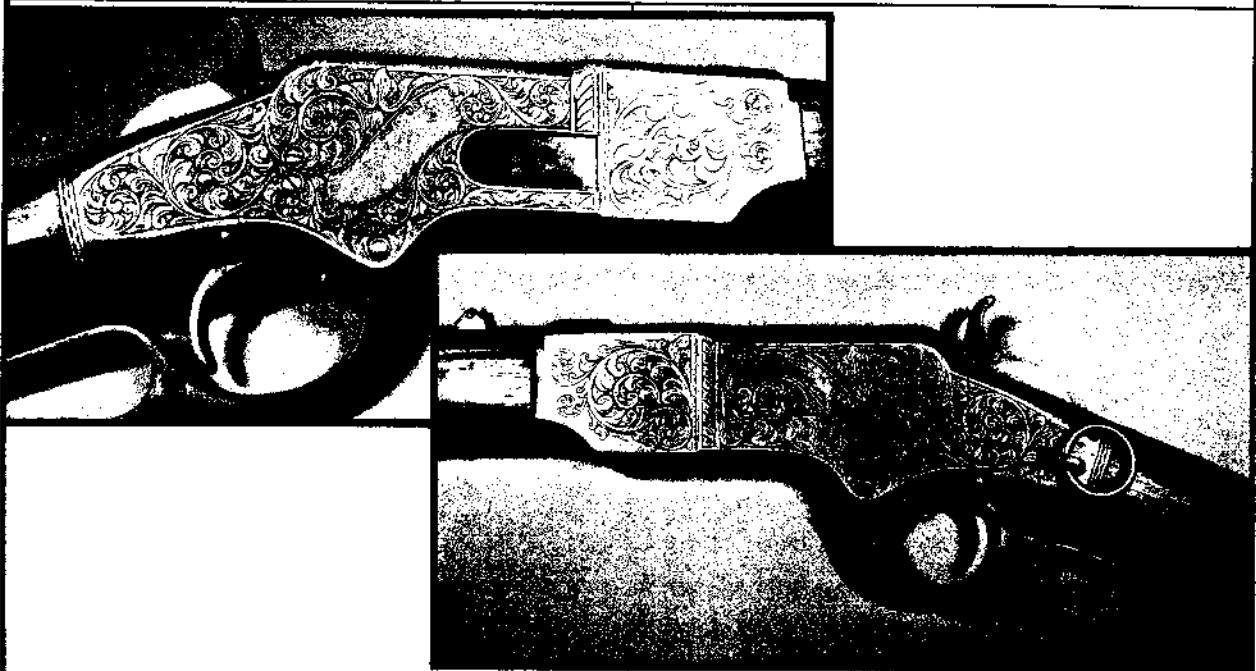


The Very First Model 1866 *Winchester* ?



In late 1866, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, began manufacturing a vastly improved version of the famous Henry rifle, made by its predecessor, the New Haven Arms Company. The new rifle had no specific name at the time, but there were references to an "improved Henry". Later it became known as the Model 1866, or "66". When enough guns had been made to build up an inventory, the new model was introduced to the public.

In the early 1950's John E. Parsons conducted a thorough analysis of the Model '66 Winchester. In 1955 he published the

results of his research in THE FIRST WINCHESTER. On page 59, Parsons stated, "...officers of the company noted that the first two carbines of the new model were sold to H.G. Litchfield of Omaha, Nebraska, on August 31, 1867, for \$34 each..." There is also reference to a single carbine, possibly a prototype, being shipped overseas in 1866.

The new model contained a number of modifications to the Henry rifle. The most notable changes included a loading gate in the right side of the receiver, a completely enclosed magazine tube, and a wooden

forearm. The new rifle retained essentially the same brass frame, brass butt plate, and wooden butt stock found on the Henry. The earliest Model '66 was manufactured at the same time the Henry was being phased out. Consequently, both rifles were manufactured concurrently. It is generally accepted by the collecting community that the first few Model '66's were serially numbered within the same range as the last few Henrys. Overlapping serials are seen on each side of the 13,000 to 14,000 serial ranges.

On page 102 of his book, Parsons concludes, *"...it is the belief of the author that Model '66 serials began in the vicinity of 13,500, approximately where the Henrys left off."* He went on to comment about lower serials: *"A few specimens of the Model '66 have been reported with serial digits of three or four from 100 to 2611. While no explanation for their separate numbering is known, the frame characteristics of such pieces are later than those in the 14,000 range. Yet most have inside serials which would date them in 1868, before serial 20,000."* Parsons believed the low serials might have constituted a special order of about 3,000 guns, and that these guns were part of production in the year 1868. There was ample precedent for Parson's theory because there had been a few special foreign orders for several hundred Henry rifles, numbered within their own separate serial sequences.

At the time Parsons researched his book, the earliest known serial number for the '66 was 13534. He studied several hundred serial numbers provided to him by collectors all over

the United States. On page 103, Parsons concluded, *"...the range of collectors' serials from 13,500 to 40,000 is quite complete, every thousand being represented with few exceptions."* The fact that serials below 13,000 had not turned up suggested that initial serial numbers for the Model '66 started concurrently with serial sequences for the Henry rifle.

As an afterthought, Parsons added a footnote to his work in chapter IV. On page 49 he noted, *"Since this chapter was written, the author has learned of several Henry rifles in the 14,000 serial range...but a Model '66 Winchester carbine is known with serial 12,995...besides several in the 13,000 range. There was, therefore, an overlap in numbers as regards the Henry and its successor model."*

In 1970, George Madis, noted Winchester authority and author of THE WINCHESTER BOOK, examined the records of Albert Tilton, a long time employee of the Winchester company. Madis examined these records, which dated back to 1867, at the Winchester Museum in New Haven, Connecticut. On page 57 of his book, Madis stated that Tilton's records showed *"...serial numbers assigned to the model 1866 were from 12,476 to 14,813 in the year 1866..."* Thus, Madis narrowed the range of serials for early Model '66 production, to a specific serial range. In his various books and publications containing the dates of manufacture and production totals for all Winchesters, Madis lists the first serial number for the Model '66 as 12476. This contrasts with most of the other

Winchester models which start with the number "1". However, there are exceptions with certain 20th century extensions of the Model 1892 and Model 1894. (Models 53, 55, 64, 65 serials were intermingled with their predecessor models' serial sequences.) The overlapping of Henry and Model '66 serials could have established such a precedent.

There is significant debate and speculation about how the new Model '66 was serially numbered and exactly when production for sale to the public began. Unfortunately, the manufacturing records prior to about 1875 have been lost or destroyed. From Parsons, we learn that the Model '66's with three digit or four digit serial numbers conform more closely to the physical characteristics of frames produced *after* the 14,000 serial sequence. Therefore, legitimate speculation might classify these guns as a special order for overseas shipment.

In the July/August, 1991 issue of MAN AT ARMS, Herbert G. Houze, former curator of the Cody Firearms Museum, presented an argument that Model '66 production started with its own serial number sequence beginning with "1". In order to reach his conclusion, he assembled numerous original Winchester documents from museum files. All other speculation about the Model '66 serial number sequence, much of it based on those same documents, has been in direct contrast to Mr. Houze's premise.

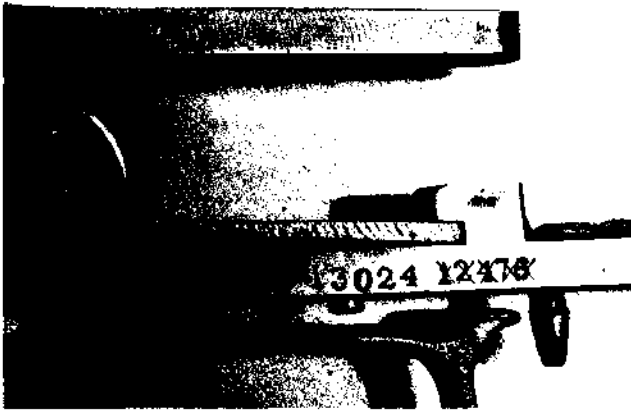
In the January/February, 1992 issue of MAN AT ARMS, Wiley Sword offers a direct rebuttal to Houze's earlier arguments. Both

articles were well written and presented a multitude of facts, figures, and, most importantly, speculation. However, it is this writer's opinion that Sword's presentation is more logical and offers a more convincing argument that the Model '66 was, indeed, serially numbered within the latter stages of Henry rifle production. Sword concluded, *"Since Mr. Houze's findings contrast with data previously published by such noted researchers and collectors as Tom E. Hall, Robert McMahon, John E. Parsons, and R.L. Wilson, his is basically a revisionist concept. As was concluded by the earlier researchers, the Model '66 was produced with serial numbers continuing from the brass framed Henry production, beginning with serial numbers about 13000 (#12476 lowest known M1866), and were intermixed with the last of the Henry rifles, some of which carried numbers into the 14000 range."*

Sword's reference to *"...(#12476 lowest known M1866)..."* coincides with Madis' research into Albert Tilton's records. In all the published material over the past 40 years relating to the Model '66, the ONLY documentary evidence relating to serial numbers assigned to the early Model '66 production is contained in Tilton's records. We also know from company records that the first Model '66 was a carbine.

There does exist a Model '66 carbine with serial number 12476 stamped in the correct location on the inside of the lower tang. As cited earlier, Tilton's records stated that this was the first serial number assigned to

the Model '66. At some point, that serial number was lightly marked over with a series of "X" marks and the tang stamped with an additional serial number 13024, which was also stamped on the butt stock, butt plate, and the bottom of the barrel. A small assembly number 25 was also stamped on the lower tang, and inside the left side plate.



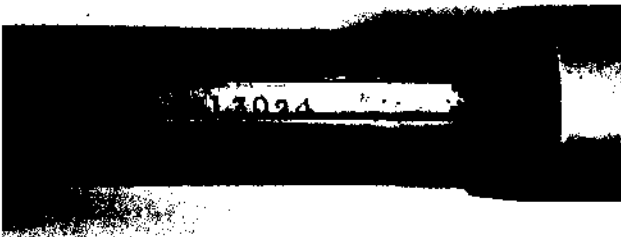
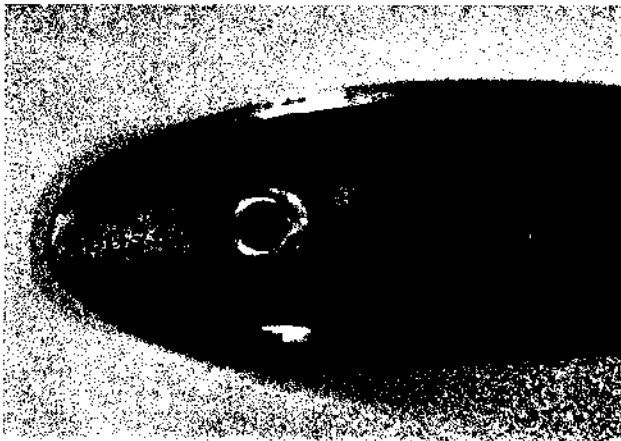
In addition to various numerals stamped on the lower tang, the initials "L.D.N." are stamped inside the upper tang. These initials belong to Louis Daniel Nimschke, the foremost firearms engraver of his day. He was well known as an independent engraver who performed work for many gun makers. R. L. Wilson notes in his book, *L.D. NIMSCHKE FIREARMS ENGRAVER*, page xix, *"The weapons to be engraved were brought to him, generally in the white (i.e., without finish); they were engraved, and then given a finish..."* Wilson goes on to say, *"Nimschke engraved guns made by better than 100 makers and manufacturers, with most of the work being done directly for them..."*

The carbine illustrated here shows number 12476 stamped in the correct location on the inside of the lower tang, just above the lever latch. The additional number 13024 was placed forward of the old number, indicating that 12476 was assigned when the frame was originally manufactured.

It is this writer's opinion that frame number 12476, being the first frame produced, might have merited special treatment. It is reasonable to assume that this frame, along with an unmarked butt plate, was sent by Winchester to Nimschke in New York to be engraved. By the time he returned the newly engraved frame and butt plate to the factory, another gun had been assigned number 12476 and shipped to the warehouse. At that time, the next unassigned number in the production line was 13024 so the inspectors simply crossed out 12476 and added 13024.



In order to complete final assembly of the gun, the factory numbered the remaining blank parts (butt stock, butt plate, and barrel) to correspond to the "new" frame number. The finished product was then shipped to a dealer for final sale to the public.



The logic in such a scenario is simple. If Winchester wanted to embellish the first one of its new model, it seems reasonable to assume one of the managers might have shipped the frame to the leading engraver of the day. The company had considerable experience with Nimschke's work through the predecessor company's production of the Henry rifle. There are a number of Henry rifles with engraving patterns almost identical to the pattern seen on this carbine. (See pages 37 and 42 in THE WINCHESTER BOOK by Madis. Also see

pages 47, 48, 49, 50 in WINCHESTER ENGRAVING by Wilson.)

It is significant that the engraving pattern contains a blank scroll on each side of the receiver. Such a pattern would be appropriate if the gun were to have an inscription added at a later date. Perhaps, the company wanted to allow for that contingency. Since the buyer decided to omit any inscription his identity will forever remain a mystery.

Debate and mystery concerning the serial numbering of the Model '66 might persist indefinitely. Speculation has continued for almost fifty years and in recent years the debate has heated up. However, the discovery of the carbine described in this article, with its unusual serial numbers and pattern of engraving, combined with the records of Albert Tiiton cited in George Madis' book, supports the argument that the Model '66 was serially numbered along with the last remnants of Henry rifle production. When George Madis examined this gun, he concluded, "*It is my opinion that number 13024-12476 could well be the first model 1866 produced and that it is probably the first model 1866 engraved by Nimschke.*"

J.L. Skinner
W.A.C.A. Life Member
NRA Life Member

(J.L. Skinner is a collector and student of Winchester arms. The '66 carbine described in this article is not for sale. The information is offered solely to expand the body of knowledge about Winchesters. It also might help to promote additional research and interest in the field of Winchester collecting.)

DATES OF MANUFACTURE

NOTE: *This is a page from George Madis' "THE WINCHESTER BOOK"*

WALTER HUNT'S REPEATER

The Hunt repeater, generally regarded as the fore-runner of the Winchester, was probably made only as a patent model in 1849.

JENNINGS AND SMITH JENNINGS

Guy Hubbard, a historian of Windsor, Vermont where Robbins and Lawrence made the Jennings repeater, stated in 1924 that he had been informed by principals of the company that only 1,000 Jennings and Smith Jennings rifles were made between 1849 and 1852 and of this number many were converted to single shots and many more were scrapped for parts.

SMITH AND WESSON

Total production of about 1,600 guns, 600 were transferred to the Volcanic Company for assembly, according to remaining Winchester records. Smith and Wesson lever action arms were made from 1853 to 1855.

VOLCANIC ARMS

From 1855 to 1857 the Volcanic Repeating Arms Company made about 3,000 guns.

NEW HAVEN ARMS

In 1857 and 1858, the New Haven Arms Company repeaters were in production. About 3,200 were made, but many of these remained on hand for almost 100 years until they were sold to employees for as little as one dollar in Winchester's surplus store.

WALCH REVOLVERS

In an attempt to raise operating capital the New Haven Arms Company and Oliver F. Winchester contracted to produce 3,000 revolvers for Cyrus Manville. These revolvers were the Walch .31 caliber style with superposed loads, made from 1860 to 1861.

HENRY RIFLES

YEAR	NO. START OF YEAR	NO. MADE
1860	1	270
61	271	129
62	301	999
63	1301	2699
64	4001	3999
65	8001	3999
66	12001	1999

Serial numbers of the Henry rifle overlap those of the model 1866 from 1865 to 1866.

1866 MODEL

YEAR	NO. START OF YEAR	NO. MADE
1866	12476	2337
67	14814	764
68	14479	4189
69	19769	9747
70	29517	23010
71	52528	35656
72	88184	21599
73	109785	8616
74	118402	6636
75	125039	926
76	125966	5941
77	131908	16299
78	148208	2285
79	150494	1707
80	152202	2177
81	154380	1727
82	157108	3405
83	159514	3862
84	162377	1272
85	163650	14
86	163665	1406
87	165072	840
88	165913	1242
89	167145	245
90	167402	300
91	167703	1300