

THE SCHOFIELD REVOLVER MAY HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE BEST FRIENDS A 19TH-CENTURY CAVALRYMAN EVER HAD.

BY PHILIP SCHREIER

GEORGE WHEELER SCHOFIELD served the Union well as an officer during America's Civil War and with the 41st Infantry and 10th and 6th cavalries during his postwar career in the West, but it is his association with a .45-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver that has kept his name alive more than anything else. That gun became fittingly known as the Model Schofield, and though overshadowed by the Colt .45, the Schofield saw considerable military and civilian use in the 1870s.

Born in Chautauqua County, N.Y., on September 20, 1833, George Wheeler's Civil War service included stints with two Missouri artillery regiments and as an aide to his older brother Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield. For meritorious service during the campaigns in Georgia and Tennessee, George Wheeler was breveted brigadier general of volunteers in January 1865. He was mustered out that November, but the following year, on July 28, he was commissioned major of the 41st Infantry.

A practical man with good mechanical ability, Schofield became keenly interested when the U.S. Army began the process of selecting a new service revolver in 1870. Since 1836, most revolvers had fired projectiles from a charge of loose powder that was ignited by a percussion cap (i.e., cap-and-ball guns). Now, the Army was about to adopt its first revolver that used self-contained metal cartridges.

Smith & Wesson had pioneered the development of such cartridges in the late 1850s. The spun brass or copper-cased rounds had what are referred to as the three P's of ammunition—projectile, propellant and primer—all in a neat, sturdy and water-proof container. No longer would rain or humidity make the discharge of a service revolver a 50-50 proposition. Loading was easier with a self-contained cartridge, though the act of unloading and loading still presented some problems.

The Army's Ordnance Review Board said that the Smith & Wesson was much superior to any other revolver submitted for review. Its big advantage was fast loading and ejection. Colt and Remington revolvers employed a loading gate on the side of the cylinder that only allowed the user to remove one cartridge at a time. The Smith



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& Wesson had a hinged frontal assembly that allowed the barrel to drop down and push upward a pinion that caught the rim of the spent casings and pushed them clear of the cylinder. In a time trial, the Smith & Wesson was emptied and reloaded in the time it took just to empty the Colt and prepare it for reloading. Such an advantage could very well save a trooper's life during a heated fight with Sioux or Comanche Indians on the Great Plains.

George Schofield joined the 10th Cavalry as a major in mid-December 1870, and later that month the Ordnance Department contracted with Smith & Wesson to supply 1,000 .44-caliber Model No. 3 (later called the "American") revolvers. Schofield was so enamored of the revolver that he won an exclusive territorial concession from the company to be its sole agent for sales in the West. Many of his fellow officers, who still had to purchase their own side arms, became fans of the Smith & Wesson No. 3.

As impressed as Schofield was with the Model No. 3's rapid ejection, he soon realized that a mounted cavalryman would still encounter problems trying to reload, especially if he was in the saddle. The thumb latch that opened the revolver frame and emptied the spent shells was a push-up latch that took both hands to operate. Schofield reasoned that if the latch pulled downward, then it could be opened with one hand and would allow the rider to keep control of the reins of the horse while he reloaded. Schofield designed a new latch and received a

The second-model Smith & Wesson Schofield seen here has a rounded barrel latch and a few other minor differences from Major George Wheeler Schofield's first-model .45-caliber revolver.

patent for it. Because Schofield was technically a government employee he was not allowed to receive royalties or licensing fees for his patent. He would, however, win a concession to receive a patent royalty on revolvers sold on the civilian market.

Major Schofield's revolver—a No. 3 altered by the company to his specifications—received an unfavorable report when it was tested in the spring of 1873, because it supposedly had too many small parts and thus was likely to break down. The Ordnance Department favored a simpler, sturdier solid-frame Colt that had been tested the previous year and was destined for fame and glory—the .45-caliber Colt Single Action Army.

Schofield did not give up, though, and he had considerable influence with the War Department because of his well-known brother, General John Schofield, who would become the commanding general of the U.S. Army in 1888. After being allowed to try again to present his case, George Schofield received good news in 1874. His .45-caliber revolver was deemed "well suited to the military service" that June, and the Ordnance Department contracted with Smith & Wesson for 3,000 Schofields that September. A second contract, again for 3,000 revolvers, followed in *Continued on page 61*

March 1875. Some of the guns delivered were second-model Schofields, which had rounded barrel latches and just a few other minor differences from the first models.

With its 7-inch blued barrel and walnut grips, the Schofield was splendid looking, and the troops in the field appreciated the ease with which it could be reloaded. Troopers in the 9th and 10th cavalries made good use of it, as did members of Colonel Ranald Mackenzie's 4th Cavalry. One small detail, though, would eventually doom the gun to military obscurity.

Daniel Wesson, the patriarch of Smith & Wesson, was in heated competition with Colt, which had been the first to arrive on the scene with a cartridge in .45 caliber. Even though the Schofield was also a .45-caliber handgun, Wesson did not want it to use Colt ammunition. The Schofield's cylinder was made shorter than Colt's so that it would not accept the long and powerful .45 Colt cartridge. On the other hand, the shorter, less potent Smith & Wesson cartridge easily fit the Colt Single Action Army revolver. On more than one occasion, soldiers equipped with Schofields found their weapons useless when the only .45 cartridges available at their Western post were Colt cartridges.

Some cavalymen favored the Colt, others favored the Schofield, but the Single Action Army's big advantage was its ability to accept both kinds of .45 cartridges. It didn't help that early in 1876, the Ordnance Review Board tested the Schofield, the Colt and Remington's Model 1875 Army revolver and concluded that the Colt Army revolver was the best of the bunch. Colt carried the day in the war for public opinion, too, and orders for the Schofields began to dry up.

That his revolver did not fare better in the long run must have been a tough blow for George Schofield to take, and so was the death of his wife, Alma, in March 1879. He also had to deal with some health problems, as well as the comments of people who said that he had personally profited from the sales of the revolver that bore his name. But his military career continued. He became lieutenant colonel of the 6th Cavalry in December 1881 and served in Arizona Territory at Fort Thomas and then at Fort Apache. It was at the later post on December 17, 1882, that Schofield, impeccable in his dress uniform, picked up a revolver that had "Schofield's Patent" inscribed on the barrel, placed the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. He was buried at City Cemetery in Freeport, Ill. ww

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