



Belt Pistols of the Mountain Men

21

by Bob Woodfill

Target shot with walnut belt pistol at 25 yards from a rest

During the mountain-man period (1806-1860), trappers, explorers, and scouts often carried one or two pistols on them. Hamilton says (1905, p. 20) of the outfit of typical mountain men in 1842 as they prepared to leave Independence, Missouri and head for the Rocky Mountains, "Each man was armed with a rifle, two pistols, a tomahawk, and a large knife, commonly called (a) tooth-picker."

Based on his examination of many belt pistols in the Museum of the Fur Trade, Hansen (1979, p. 83) agrees and adds, "Pistols were more important than the legends make them and half or more of the mountain men carried a pair. The more dashing or imposing figures seemed to favor rifled pistols and Derringer was a popular maker for the fur traders."

Belt pistols are, of course, pistols to be carried in one's belt or sash without a holster. Russell (1967, p. 77) writes, "They were holster guns, but more often than not they were merely tucked into the trapper's waistband."

These pistols differ from the larger military "horse" or "dragoon" pistols carried on the saddle in a holster. The larger pistols were a combination of old British service pistols left surplus after the Revolutionary War, Harpers Ferry pistols made from 1806-1808, or .54 caliber U.S. Military Model 1816 and 1819 pistols (Hansen, 1960, p. 161). All of these larger pistols, weighing almost four pounds, fired a ball big enough for running buffalo and could withstand heavy charges, but they were simply too heavy to be carried everyday in the mountain man's belt.



Figure 1 – A typical belt pistol made by W. Chance of Birmingham, UK (Museum of the Fur Trade Collection)

Belt pistols generally weighed less than two pounds, carried six- to seven-inch barrels and were .40-.49 caliber. Barsotti (1954, p.156) said that pistols were carried by the mountain men as supplements to their rifles and quotes Sabin (1914) that they were worn either singly or in pairs, as authentic drawings made at the rendezvous show. Their purpose was self protection, and they served as backup when the mountain man's rifle was incapacitated or being reloaded. Russell (1967, p. 95) writes that:

It was the arm of final resort in the "last-ditch stand," and in that connection it receives rare recognition in the records of the trade. But it was also ever-present on the trapper's person and was brought into more frequent unspectacular uses seldom mentioned in the journals.

To be practical, you would assume that the caliber of the mountain man's belt pistol(s) matched the caliber and mold of his rifle, but that was often not the case. Throughout the mountain-man period the caliber of the rifles increased from about .50 to .58 as larger calibers and their associated heavier lead and powder charges were used. The caliber of the belt pistols remained .40-.49, which required the mountain men to carry two ball sizes. A typical example comes from Parkman (1912, p. 368), who writes about shooting buffalo from horseback on the Laramie plains in 1846:

My firearms were all empty, and I had in my pouch nothing but rifle bullets, too large for the pistols and too small for the gun. I loaded the latter (rifle with pistol bullets), however, but as often as I leveled it to fire, the little bullets would roll out the muzzle and the gun returned only a faint report like a squib, as the powder harmlessly exploded.

Most of the belt pistols were imported to St. Louis as either completed pistols or rough pistol parts (kits?). The local firearms makers and dealers completed the pistols and sold them to mountain men, frontier trading posts, or as supplies to the rendezvous gatherings. A set of rough pistol parts in the Museum of the Fur Trade collection is shown in Hansen (1960, p. 156). W. Chance & Son of Birmingham, England made many belt pistols for the American frontier trade during this time. A typical Chance belt pistol from the collections of the Museum of the Fur Trade is shown in Hansen (1960, Plate 71, p. 160). The pistol has an octagonal, twist-steel barrel 6 1/2-inches long and is .47 caliber. It is fitted with a hooked patent breech and has front and rear

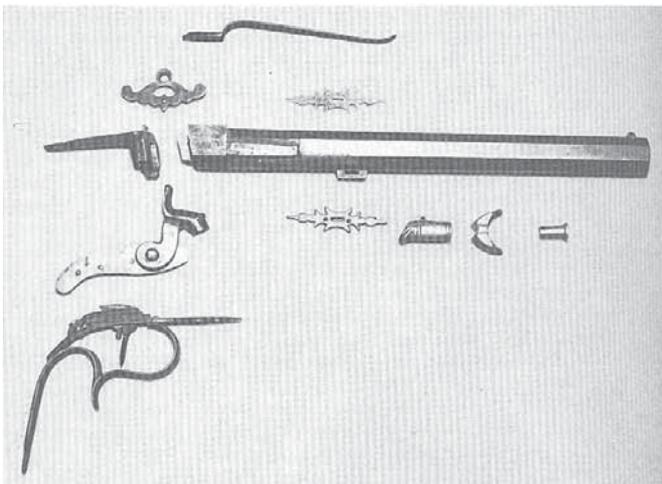


Figure 2 – A typical set of 1880's pistol parts in the rough for sale to gunsmiths. (Museum of the Fur Trade Collection)



Figure 3 – Typical belt pistol sold by Deringer and Tryon and Co., Philadelphia. (Baird, 1960)

sights. The checkered walnut stock is fitted with silver inlays that make it appear more American than British in taste. The whole gun strongly resembles the early Deringer belt pistol, and this may have been the maker's intention. Another similar belt pistol of .47 caliber and sold in vast quantities by Deringer and Tryon of Philadelphia and Chance is shown in Baird (1960, p. 62). These little guns are very similar to the six-inch belt pistols purchased several times from W. Chance and Co. by Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Co. for the Ashley expedition of 1824 and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (Hansen, 1960, p. 158). One order to W. Chance noted in the Chouteau accounts for the year of 1855 includes "24 pistols, 6 & 7 in. barrels, percussion locks."

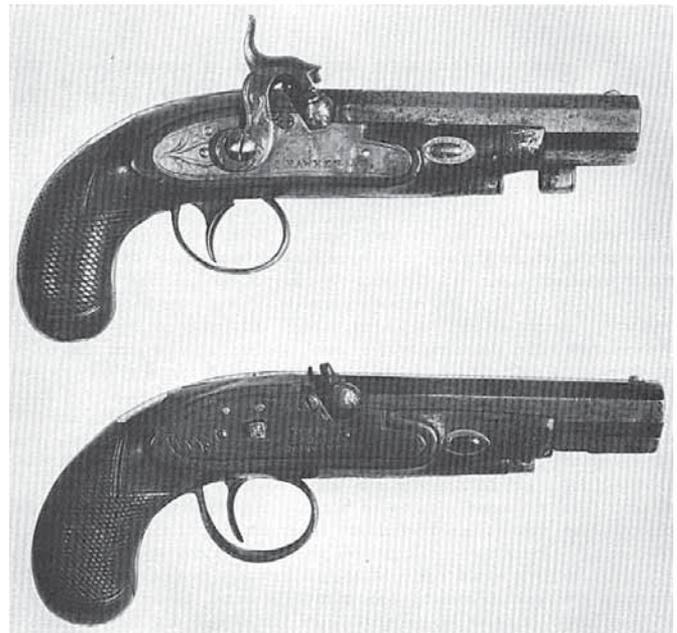


Figure 4 – Two small belt pistols by Hawken (Missouri Historical Society Museum)



Figure 5 – Modern parts for making belt pistols from L&R Locks and Pecatonica River Supply.



Figure 6 – Lock needs to be “fit” to snail of breech for proper hammer throw.



Figure 7 – Two modern belt pistols made from L&R and Pecatonica components.

The famous Hawken brothers' gunmaking firm in St. Louis also imported belt pistols for the fur trade. Two representative pistols are in the Missouri Historical Society Museum. They are similar in appearance, with about .44 caliber octagonal barrels about four inches long and half-stocked. One lock is stamped Powell & Co. (St. Louis hardware dealer) and the other S. Hawken. There is every indication that the Hawken Shop imported most of the known Hawken-stamped belt pistols either as completed pistols or as assembled parts.

Modern Belt Pistol Replicas

Until recently there have been no suitable parts for the modern gunmaker to build a reproduction of the belt pistols used during the mountain-man period. No small back-

action locks were available, and most front-action locks were either too big or not a good representative of the period. Fortunately, this has changed, and L&R Lock Company (www.lr-rpl.com) and Pecatonica River Long Rifle Supply Company (www.longrifles-pr.com) can supply a suitable lock and semi-inletted stock.

L&R's small pistol lock #750, breech plug, trigger/trigger plate, and trigger guard designed for a Lincoln-style Deringer can be modified and made into a small pistol representative of the mountain-man-era belt pistols. The lock is a back-action type, right-hand only, and the plate measures 3 1/8-inches long x 7/8-inch wide. The solid patent breech plug is made for 7/8-inch diameter octagonal barrels with a 5/8-18 thread, has a beautiful snail and two-

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Figure 8 – Engraved parts with rough engraving done on imported belt pistols of 1800's.

inch tang. The trigger plate has a pineapple finial. The trigger guard is offered in either brass or German silver.

Pecatonica can supply a suitable semi-inletted stock in walnut or several grades of maple for making small belt pistols. Their semi-inlet stock is inletted for the L&R #750 lock, breech plug, trigger guard, and a 7/8-inch diameter octagonal barrel up to seven inches long. The pattern is designed with excess wood so the builder can make full- or half-stocked pistols of several designs.

This is not a simple drop-in kit project and some modifications will need to be made to the parts. The semi-inlet pattern is designed for placement of the lock lower than with a Deringer and the lock plate must be fit to the snail by removing .010" - .050" with a drum grinding wheel. The hammer will have to be heated and bent about .100" towards the centerline of the barrel so that it will strike the nipple squarely. The trigger lever must also be thickened by .035" to eliminate side play and extended upward to engage the lock sear more positively. L&R is modifying their trigger assembly so that the parts originally intended for a small Deringer-type pistol can also be used to make a small belt pistol.

The author made two representative belt pistols using the L&R and Pecatonica components. One is a half-stock in maple with engraving similar to the W. Chance pistols, and the other in walnut with a plain full-stock, as would have been assembled by local gunmakers. Both pistols used a six-inch, .50 caliber, 7/8" diameter octagonal Green Mountain pistol barrel blank (1-20" twist) available from Track of the Wolf (www.trackofthewolf.com). The pistols have been antiqued or aged so that they look as though they have *been to the mountains*.

Both pistols were tested for accuracy from a bench using 25-40 grains of Goex FFG and FFFg black powder, a Hornady .490 round ball with .015" lubricated patches, and CCI #11 percussion caps. They produced two- to three-inch five-shot groups at 25 yards.

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