



# The High-Tech Peacemaker

**U.S. Fire Arms  
applies modern  
gunmaking to a  
classic.**

**S**ince before the Civil War, an imposing brick building has sat next to the Connecticut River in the city of Hartford. Multi-storied, with high-ceilinged rooms and hardwood floors, this historic structure is the Old Armory. It was built by Sam Colt to house the factory that developed and produced firearms for a fast-growing nation. In the early days of the Colt Armory, water diverted from the adjacent river drove the machinery of the plant by means of overhead shafts and leather belts. In the 1850s and 1860s, it was the most modern plant in the world—sort of 19th century high tech. The Old Armory was the birthplace of dozens of classic firearms—the 1860 Army revolver,

the Lightning Magazine Rifle and in later years, John Browning's 1911 pistol and 1918 Automatic Rifle. In 1873, it saw the first Single Action Army revolver produced and shipped to the United States Army.

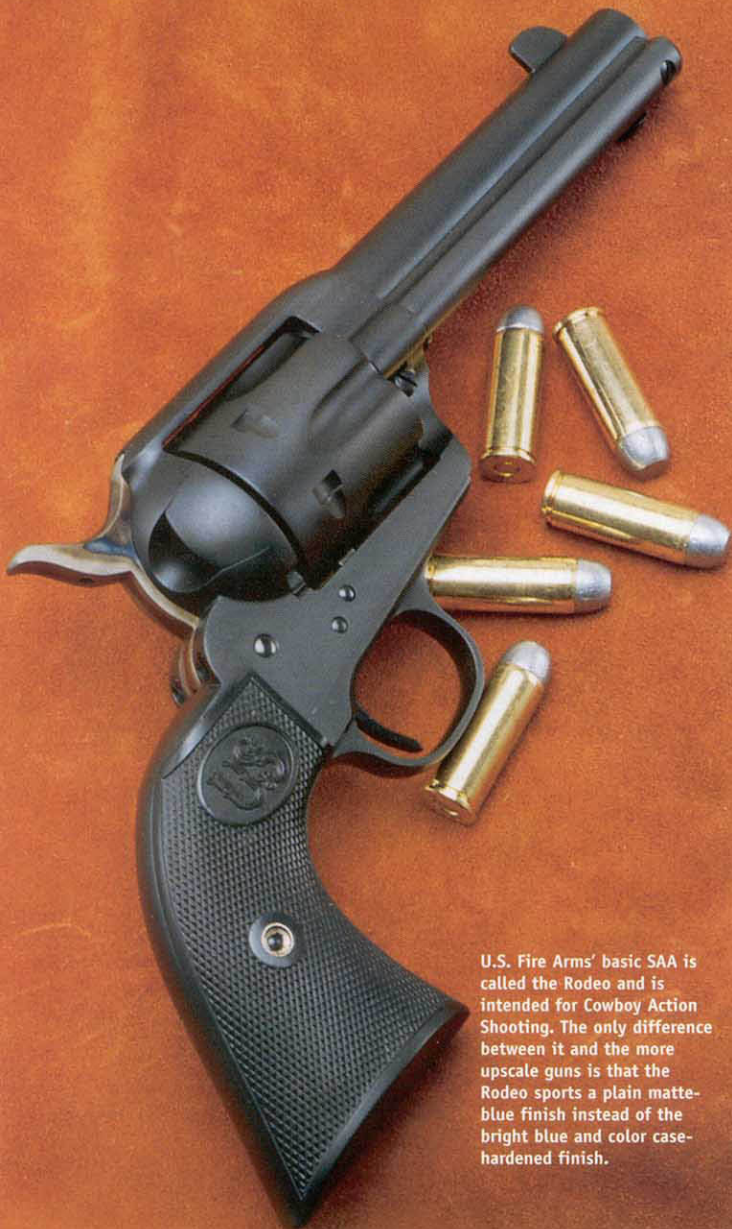
The blue dome topped with a proud Rampant Colt still surmounts the legendary building, but the machinery that did so much to arm the Republic no longer turns. Colt Firearms has long since moved to a more modern plant in the city of Hartford. A visitor to the Old Armory finds empty rooms and hears echoes of the past. But there is still plenty of activity down at one end of the first floor. Here, you'll find the offices of U.S. Fire Arms, a company that makes the most famous gun that was originally built in the Old Armory. U.S. Fire Arms is headed up by Doug Donnelly, one-time competitive shotgunner and eternal history buff. Donnelly is driven to replicate the classic firearms that were so much a part of our frontier past. Therefore, U.S. Fire Arms builds Peacemakers. Not just any old Peacemaker, but original-style guns meticulously rendered right down to the last screw, bushing and detail of finish.

**By Wiley Clapp**

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U.S. Fire Arms' basic SAA is called the Rodeo and is intended for Cowboy Action Shooting. The only difference between it and the more upscale guns is that the Rodeo sports a plain matte-blue finish instead of the bright blue and color case-hardened finish.

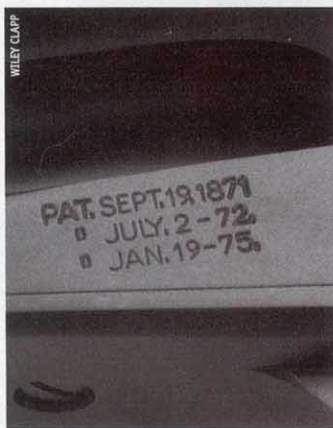
All of it is there, every line and curve. The front sights are exactly the same size and shape, the trigger guards have the same radii, the one-piece walnut grips are one piece of walnut and even the smoky, swirly colors of the case-hardened frame and hammer are original. It is literally like walking into Spangenberg's gun shop in Tombstone, AZ, in 1881 and picking out a new sidearm. The gun even comes in a box that replicates the original. For history buffs, reenactors and—most of all—Cowboy Action Shooters, the production of these new Peacemakers is a wish finally granted. At a very reasonable price, anyone can own one (or two?) original Single Action Army revolvers. Moreover, you can have the gun(s) your way, just like Bat Masterson wanted when he wrote the famous letter asking for one that was "...easy on the trigger."

U.S. Fire Arms builds several lines of Peacemakers. They include guns in the Pre-War style, plain SAAs, the China Camp model for SASS shooters, Flat-tops and Buntlines. There's even a Custom Shop to build a personal dream gun with several levels of engraving and grips of exotic wood, pearl and ivory. Finally, there is the Rodeo. It's a plain working revolver with a matte-blue finish. One of the more interesting features of the U.S. Fire Arms effort is the array of calibers offered. Even in the SAA and Pre-War series, you can specify caliber and barrel length. Without any major difficulty, you can order a 7½-inch Pre-War style .32-20 or a short 4¼-inch .41 Long Colt.

The actual manufacturing facility for U.S. Fire Arms is down the street a



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**The SAAs from U.S. Fire Arms are exact copies of the original Colts produced in the same building the originals were made. Even the frame and barrel stampings are identical, as is the fixed firing pin and color-casehardened hammer.**

short distance. It offers the advantages of modern lighting and ventilation, plus level floors for sophisticated machinery. Last fall, I visited both the company offices in the Old Armory and the new plant. Shown through both buildings by the company's marketing director, Geno Paesano, I came away with considerable respect for what they are doing and how they are doing it. At the time of my visit, the offices of the company were in the Old Armory, but Paesano also took me to a large open area near the front entrance on Van Dyke Avenue. He explained the company planned to build a period style showroom for all of its products here, as well as actual working space for the craftsmen who make up the Custom Shop staff. The showroom would be in the original location of

Colonel Sam Colt's office. Since the Custom Shop would be producing completed guns here, it would allow me to say the Peacemaker had returned to production in the Old Armory. For company president Donnelly, this sort of thing has importance. He is deeply concerned about creating tangible links to the building's past and the guns that were once built there.

Donnelly is also a businessman who very much wants to offer a high-quality product at a fair price. While his product is a revolver exactly like the ones used by the 7th Cavalry in 1875, he knows he cannot make them in exactly the same way. That is why he constructed the manufacturing facility down the street. If walking into the Old Armory is like walking back into yesteryear, then taking a

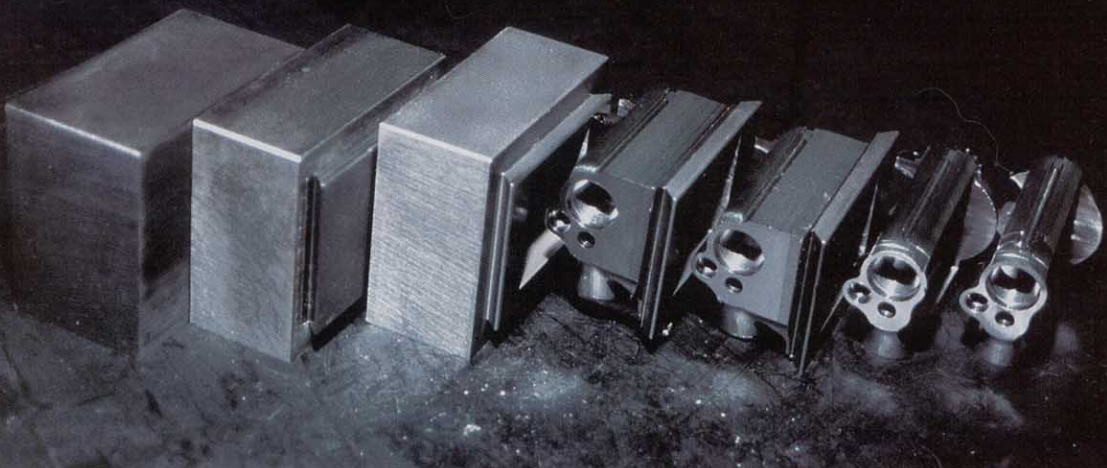
step through the front entrance of the plant is a step into tomorrow. Of all the handgun plants I have visited, this was easily the most sophisticated. It was also the cleanest and possibly the most quiet.

In the first years of the company, many of the component parts of its revolvers were purchased in a partially completed state from offshore vendors. U.S. Fire Arms personnel finished them up and fitted them together to make completed guns. That is no longer true. Every single part of the complete revolver is now made in the Hartford plant. How they do it is a fascinating look at modern-machining methods. Geno Paesano walked me through the process from initial material acceptance and preparation, to test firing and packaging of the finished gun.

Except for the wood or hard-rubber grips, the material for a Peacemaker revolver is steel. The steel comes into the U.S. Fire Arms plant in long bars and cylinders. After an initial examination, it is machine-cut to length and placed in color-coded plastic bins. The most complex part to produce is the frame, which has somewhat unusual contours in the recoil shield and loading gate area. Like many other of the various parts, frames get their distinctive shape by CNC (Computer Numeric Control) machines. A number of the pre-cut frame blocks go onto a holding fixture, which then goes into a CNC machine. The machine operator closes the doors of the machine and presses a few buttons on the control panel. Some of these machines in the U.S. Fire Arms plant are the size of a

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Starting as a block of 4140 steel, frames are machined in several steps on a CNC machine to achieve the final profile. The SAA's frame is a very complex part to machine because of the recoil shield combined with the internal recess necessary for the lock-work.



full-size SUV. From here, the operator's job is pretty much to monitor the progress of the machining. That's because another man has written the computer program that tells the machine to move a series of cutters to a particular position and remove a specified amount of steel. In six separate steps, a beautifully contoured Peacemaker frame emerges from a solid chunk of steel bar stock. The quality of the machine, combined with the accuracy of the computer program that drives it, result in a part that is exact to one ten-thousandth of an inch.

Other machines produce things like the pins, screws, bushings and rods that go into a completed revolver. An Integrex Lathe system produces the barrels and cylinders and a broach rifling process puts the rifling system in the gun-drilled barrel. For the parts like hammers, triggers and hands, the plant uses an EDM cutting process to give those components their distinctive shape. The point to all of this is simple: This plant uses the most modern and best-quality machining operation to produce the various parts of the gun. Even the one-piece wood grip comes from a special CNC machine that takes a square block of walnut and spits out a beautiful grip. Machines can produce the parts of a gun, but it takes human hands to finish and assemble them into a working revolver.



Unlike a lot of machine shops, U.S. Fire Arms' shop is meticulously clean. Most of its employees are shooters as well and take a great deal of pride in their work and the product.

So Donnelly hires the best-qualified technicians possible. Most are shooters and gun buffs, so working in a Peacemaker plant is akin to working in a chocolate factory. Much of the final finishing of components is done with careful hand polishing. For example, each pair of grips is fitted to each individual frame by hand. However, since both grips and frames were manufactured to a very tight tolerance, the fitting process is not a

time-consuming one. After all of the metal parts are blued, a skilled technician at an assembly table puts the gun together. I watched as one such man carefully assembled a special-order revolver. It was a Flattop Target Model with a 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrel in .44 Russian. Then we moved over to the in-house shooting tube and I had the honor of test-firing a brand new gun.

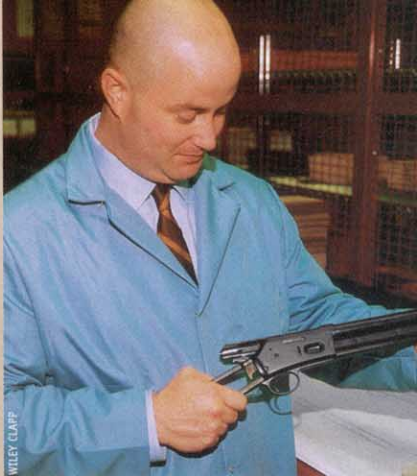
The preceding description is far too brief to adequately convey all the care

given to the process of building fine handguns. There are many other steps that require conscientious attention to detail. In talking to the guys who do this work, you get the feeling they are enthusiastic about their work. Most have experience with other aspects of the firearms industry in New England and are plenty happy to be working where they are. The atmosphere all over the plant is positive and upbeat.

The variety of Peacemaker variations available from U.S. Fire Arms is incredible. Consider the Rodeo model. This is a .45 Colt with either a 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ - or 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrel. The main distinguishing feature is a plain, matte-blue finish on the entire gun, except for the hammer, which is casehardened. On a gun that is intended for SASS competition, a glare-free finish makes sense and it obviously costs less to produce. For that reason, a shooter can buy a genuine Peacemaker that is authentic in every dimensional and operating detail for a low price. Considering that Cowboy Action Shooting usually requires a pair of guns, the Rodeo is very appealing.

If a man wants to spend a little more money, he can have the color casehardening and the carefully polished blue gun. Many calibers are available and if you step up to the Custom Shop versions, you can order a lot of different features, particularly where grips are concerned. At one point several years ago, U.S. Fire Arms offered such additional models as the Bisley. The Bisleys are not currently available, but they might be returned to the product line in the foreseeable future.

For true Frontier-era gun enthusiasts, there is even more good news. By the end of this year, U.S. Fire Arms will have a Colt Lightning Magazine Rifle replica. It will come in carbine and both round and octagon-barreled rifle versions. In the time that Colt produced it, the Lightning in three frame sizes was a popular gun. It did not sell in the numbers enjoyed by the various Winchester and Marlin lever guns, but the Lightning has a great advantage for SASS competition. It can be fired much faster than the levers. Calibers for the new Lightning will be .38 WCF, .44 WCF and .45 Colt.



**Owner Doug Donnelly looks over a prototype of U.S. Fire Arms' latest project, recreating the Colt Lightning rifle. It will soon be available in three frame sizes, meticulously accurate in its replication and made entirely in the United States.**


Every part, down to the last screw, pin and spring, is made in the U.S. Fire Arms plant. However, instead of the overhead belt-driven machinery of the 19th century, today's revolvers are manufactured using computer-controlled machinery and tolerances to .0001 inch.



Assemblers wrap the cylinder with paper as they fit it to the frame to prevent it from being scratched. This gun, a .44 Russian flat-top with a 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrel, was test fired by the author when it was completed.



I saw prototypes during my visit and they look really good. Also, Donnelly has a couple of other tricks up his sleeve where guns of the West are concerned. Wait and see.

New firearms companies come and go. When the product is very good, they tend to stay. U.S. Fire Arms has been with us for about 10 years and its products are absolutely outstanding. Famed revolversmith Hamilton Bowen, who knows period revolvers inside and out, had some interesting things to say about U.S. Fire Arms products. In a recent phone conversation, Bowen told me that he no longer uses any other gun for his exotic custom Peacemaker conversions, including his superb Keith #5 model. This is not really a big surprise, because it is obvious that U.S. Fire Arms is a company that builds some of the finest single-action revolvers ever made. They are dedicated to it. 

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