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First Model 1866 Rifle Serial Number 15052

A thorough inspection has been made of this rare Winchester and it has determined it is all original as made by Winchester.

This inspection includes all of the outside as well as the inside workings and components.

Records show this rifle was made in 1867.

We see many of the early features and variations on number 15052, and it clearly shows its Henry rifle parentage.

Serial numbers of these earliest models are found on the left side of the inside lower tang. This serial number is also found on the stub in the inlet for the upper tang and on the inside toe of the buttplate. First models also often have the serial number stamped under the barrel, as seen here. All of these numbers match and are original.

Rifles in the 1866 model were provided with twenty-four inch octagon barrels, as on this rifle. Barrel markings are clear and original and were stamped just ahead of the rear sight.

No caliber markings are found on early 1866 models, since only one caliber was offered; this was the famous .44 Henry rimfire cartridge.

The breech bolt, firing pin and

and chamber are all original and remain in the original .44 rimfire configuration.

Magazines on earlier guns have the magazine cap threaded into the magazine tube, and the magazine retaining band is attached to the barrel with two screws. A through pin secures the band to the magazine. This method of attaching the magazine is unique to Flint Model rifles, and after this band is attached or replaced, but all of these components are original to this gun.

Magazines for 1866 rifles had a capacity of seventeen cartridges, a great feature for use on the frontier. Inside of the magazine tube of Flint Models the magazine spring is pinned to the follower and a small wooden clonel serves as a spring guide. This is seen only on Flint Models.

The follower stop, a separate piece, is threaded into the magazine tube on these earliest guns.

The front sight is of earliest "Sporting" style, and the nickel-silver sighting blade was provided. Rear sights of early rifles were also of "Sporting" style, with the graduations from 100 to 1000 yards. These earliest rifle sights have rounded tops and do not have the retaining screw of later issues.

Receivers, elevators and buttplates were

of bronze, usually called "Gun Metal" at the time this gun was made. This metal was considered superior for gun actions and was relatively soft. Many of these 1866 models, especially in early issues, have seen much use and abuse; on this rifle the bronze parts are in unusually fine condition. A smooth, even patina of age is seen on the bronze here, and these parts have not been cleaned or polished.

Many First Model rifles have saddle rings, or "Slwing Rings" as they were called in early catalogs and literature.

Saddle rings were convenient for most users, but because of the sound made by the ring against the receiver, many of the rings have been removed. The saddle ring and its retaining style here are original to this rifle.

Hammer and levers of the 1866 model were case-hardened, and hammers do not have the half-cock safety notch.

Early First Models do not have the flange at the front of the receiver to accommodate a wider forend. These early forends are quite thin and because of this many have been damaged, but the forend here is in excellent original condition. Brass escutcheons were fitted to each side of the forend to

re-enforce the forward where the forward screw is located. Front sides of the forward have an attractive decorative chofer.

Only grain dense walnut was used for the stock and forward of this rifle, and it remains in excellent condition. An extra coat of varnish may have been added at some time in the past, but if this was done it shows more after the finish was applied.

The walnut of this rifle shows more but no abuse and great care in handling.

Assembly numbers were used on the earliest 1866 models; this number "1676" is seen on the lower tang near the serial number and on each sideplate. These numbers are correct and matching. Assembly numbers were necessary since sideplates were hand-fitted to the receiver.

Under the barrel we see two markings: "++", indicating the gun had been proof fired and passed the test. Also seen in this location is the letter "W", an inspector's mark of approval for the fit and finish.

First models such as this have one additional wood screw in the upper tang behind the hammer, as also found on Henry rifles, and this was a somewhat weak area.

On the stock compartment under the

First Model Rifle Number 15052

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trapdoor in the buttplate is a current four piece winding rod with brass tip.

Overall the blued finish of the steel and iron parts have developed the aged "plum-brown" color of age.

It is most unusual to find a First Model rifle, especially one with every part original to the gun. Hard use and abuse on the frontier resulted in the loss of most of these guns. The total production, few rifles were made, since carbines were much more popular. It is probable that less than fifty First Model rifles have survived, and of this low number, many have been altered or re-worked.

Of all guns in use at the same time as the 1866 Winchester, the Winchester was, by far, the superior gun.

By any standard for any gun, number 15052 is truly outstanding.

With the age of well over one hundred years, rarity, condition and historical importance, this First Model rifle should have a prominent place in any fine collection or museum.

Lee M. Jones

#15052 NOTED IN

GEORGE MADIS "THE WINCHESTER BOOK"

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