

FRONTIERSMAN'S REVOLVER IS FOUND IN ENGLAND

by Slim Ackerman

New Mexico

(Illustrated by the author)

This is a three-part story. First, we have one of the most famous battles of the Indian Wars — a nine day siege of a military party by several tribes, under Roman Nose.

Then there is the encouraging report of an English collector's determination to trace the history of his percussion revolver.

Finally, there is concrete information for other collectors, who may wish to do similar research, and who may profit by his experience.

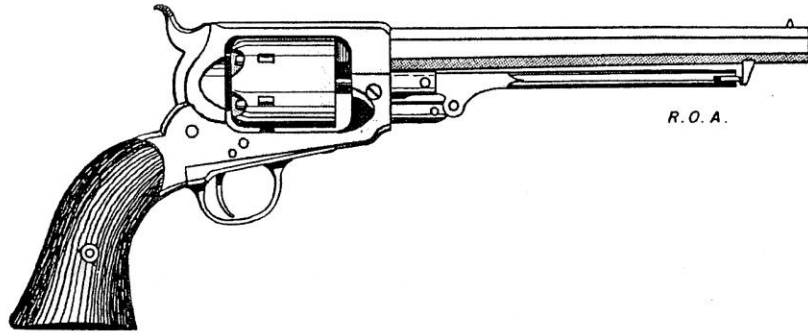
It was on August 29, 1868, that General Philip Sheridan sent out a special scouting party from Fort Hays, Kansas. They were to ride across the Solomon River, then down Beaver Creek to Fort Wallace, reporting any apparent activity of hostile Indians in that area.

The party of 51 mounted men was commanded by Brevet Colonel George A. "Sandy" Forsyth. First Lieutenant Frederick H. Beecher was second in command. The chief guide was Sharp Grover, a seasoned plainsman. Except for a military surgeon, the balance of the party were civilians — all experienced frontiersmen recruited for this mission.

These volunteers were signed up as "quartermaster employees", for lack of better authorization. Each received a dollar a day, plus 35 cents a day for the use of his horse. The army supplied equipment and rations.

Each man was issued a Spencer Repeating Rifle with 140 rounds of ammunition, a Colt Army Revolver with 30 rounds, and seven days' cooked rations in his haversack. A pack train of four mules carried 4,000 extra cartridges, medical supplies, salt, coffee, picks, shovels, etc.

There are conflicting accounts of this incident, but my facts are taken from the actual report written by Col. Forsyth, himself. I believe his version is



A Whitney .36 Navy revolver.

the safest to follow, as he was there.

Seeing signs of hostile activity, the party's investigation took them several miles across the line into Colorado. Following the Arikara Fork of the Republican River, they had camped upon the river bank 85 miles north of their destination.

Here, at dawn of September 17, 1868, they were attacked by a force of nearly a thousand hostiles. These included Northern Cheyenne, Ogallala and Brule-Sioux. They were led by Roman Nose. The hostiles received orders by an artillery bugle, which was also reported after The Battle Of Adobe Walls, Texas, during the same campaign.

It is interesting to read an actual eyewitness description of a famous plains Indian war chief. Roman Nose was an imposing figure at six feet, three inches. Wearing little except war paint, he rode a beautiful chestnut bareback. His toes were tucked under a horse-hair rope around the horse, and he used a simple Indian bridle, tied to the lower jaw and decorated with feathers.

The hostiles were well organized, and armed with Henry and Spencer Repeaters, as well as single-shots, bows and lances. I would bet that some Cheyenne carried the unusual bow-lance of their "Bow String" society.

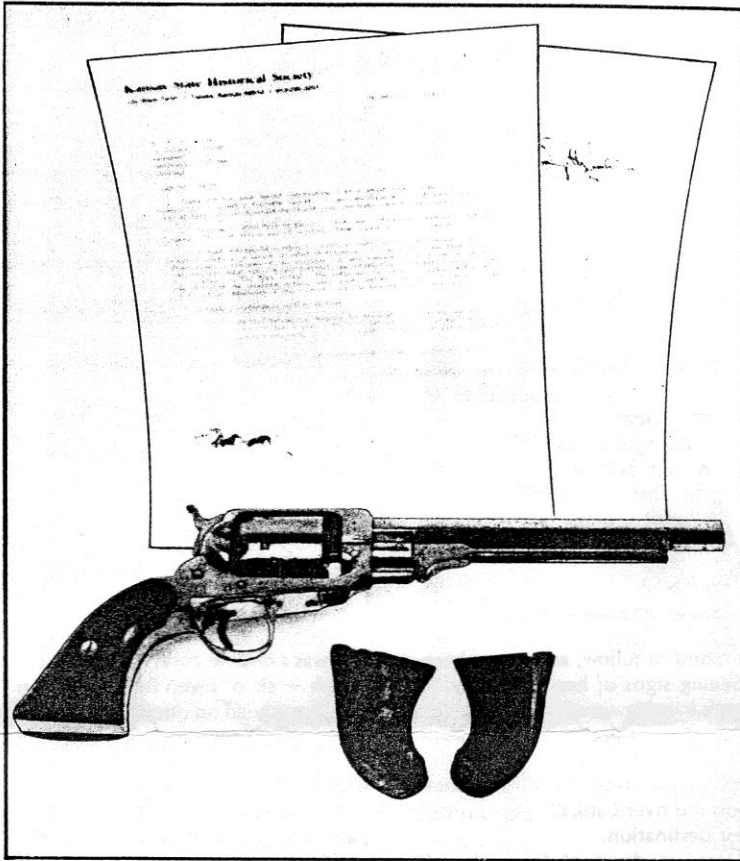
This was a double-curved bow of great length — six or seven feet — with an iron lance head on one end. Sketches made at that time indicate that only certain Cheyenne used these multiple-purpose weapons.

An able leader, Forsyth ordered his party to an island in the middle of the nearly dry river bed, where they would have cover but the hostiles would not. They lost some supplies in the rush, but managed to save the extra ammunition and some digging tools.

Soon, the hostiles conducted the first of several massed charges. They were repulsed, but Lt. Beecher was killed and Forsyth sustained three bullet wounds. As the besieged frontiersmen alternately fired and dug rifle pits, the hostiles pressed their attack relentlessly. During one of their first massed charges, Chief Roman Nose was killed.

The close of the first day saw the flat, nearly dry, river bed dotted with Indian bodies and dead horses. The whites already had 24 casualties, dead and wounded, out of 51.

As time wore on, the charges stopped, and it settled down to a siege. By the fifth day, gangrene became a problem. Medical aid was sketchy, as the surgeon was gravely wounded. Pierre Trudeau and youngster Jack



Jack Peate's Whitney revolver, flanked by the original grips and by letters from the Kansas State Historical Society.

Stillwell had sneaked through the enemy lines, but Forsyth and his party had no idea whether they had succeeded. The two did reach Fort Wallace three days later. Stillwell later became one of the best-known scouts on the plains.

Finally, on the ninth day, a troop of the 10th Cavalry arrived. The hostiles withdrew, still firing. Several miles behind the troopers came the main column, with ambulance wagons and food. After decomposing horse flesh, eaten raw, anything looked good.

Lt. Col. Louis H. Carpenter, commanding the first rescuers, found his friend Forsyth with three wounds, propped up with a Spencer across his knees. With nothing left to fight with except sheer courage, the gallant officer was reading a copy of "Oliver Twist."

He later confessed that this gesture was only to avoid breaking down with emotion.

It required two years for Forsyth to recover from his injuries.

He later learned that the combined hostile force had numbered 970. A young Sioux chief admitted the Indians had lost 75 dead and about 225 wounded. Slightly over half of the 51 whites were killed or wounded.

The tiny, alder-covered island in the dry wash became known as Beecher's Island, in honor of 1st Lt. Frederick H. Beecher, 3rd Infantry. The popular young officer had been the first to give his life defending it.

Lt. Beecher was a nephew of Henry Ward Beecher of "Beecher's Bibles" fame (Sharps Rifles), and of Harriet Beecher Stowe ("Uncle Tom's Cabin").

We now turn to another personal account — that of the very first rescuer to arrive on the scene.

The story of James Jared Peate would make a terrific movie of frontier life, as it really was. Jack, as he was known,

went to Lincoln County, Kansas, in 1866, as a boy of 16. He was befriended by six army veterans, and these seven became the first settlers in Lincoln County. Jack took a homestead on Twelve-Mile Creek, near where the town of Beverly now stands. Rather than settling down, his adventures were only beginning. On one occasion, he and two other men were captured by Chief Roman Nose on Limestone Creek. They escaped only because the Indians were fired upon by a party of hunters.

Jack became a scout for the army,



James Jared (Jack) Peate 1850-1932
(From a photograph)

carrying dispatches between the frontier forts and posts. The voluminous notes and diaries that he kept were to become an important source for historians, in more recent times. In them he told of experiences as a dispatch rider, including an Indian ambush from which only a superior horse saved him. This happened in an area he called the "Blue Hills", and this name figures largely in our story farther on.

As the railroads pushed westward, pressures mounted and Indian troubles increased. Small settlements and isolated farms were attacked and burned. Regular troops were too few to cope with such a vast area, so it was suggested that a small force of civilian frontiersmen be formed for protection. General Sheridan asked Jack Peate to recruit this force. All picked men, they were good horsemen, expert shots, and understood Indians. As the idea came from Col. Forsyth, they got the name of "Forsyth Scouts." Peate's journal disagrees with Forsyth's

records on exact pay scale, but on little else. Jack furnished his own horse and weapons. We know he used a Henry Repeating Rifle (.44 rimfire). If we obtain access to parts of his journal that are in the hands of relatives, we hope to learn more.

Jack Peate was not with the other Forsyth Scouts at the siege of Beecher's Island, as he was scouting for the 10th Cavalry under Lt. Col. Carpenter. Word reached them of the siege, and a grueling forced march began. This was complicated by not knowing exactly where it was taking place. Carpenter and Peate expected it to be farther south than it was. Searching as they went, they finally topped a ridge and saw the beleaguered island far below them.

Like enraged banshees, the troopers swept down into the valley, whooping and firing. Far in the lead was Jack Peate, his fear for his friends his only consideration. After a brief running fight, the hostiles had enough and left. The number of squaws on the hillsides, as spectators, undoubtedly aided this decision.

Amid tears of joy, Jack was relieved of what little food he carried — a 2-inch square of bacon and a little hardtack. As each arriving trooper did a sliding dismount, saddlebags were emptied.

"Eat, boys, eat!", they yelled, "There's more in the wagons behind us!"

My close friend William Upton, in England, wanted to add a Colt 1860 Army revolver to his modest collection. At the Bedford Arms Fair, however, prices were out of reach. Bill settled for a Whitney .36 Navy percussion revolver, with warped, broken grips and covered with grime. All the crud in the world could not conceal that fantastic balance and "feel", so he knew this was for him.

Bill rushed home and soaked it overnight in "paraffin" (coal oil to us colonists). Gentle brushing then revealed clean metal surfaces, only slightly pitted. On the base of the butt was H. A. PLEATHER. On the web of the loading lever hinge was J. PEATE. He ordered an original mainspring from Dixie Gun Works, and had beautiful new grips made from "root" walnut by a gunsmith. Then he turned his attention to the original grips, which he wisely desired to keep.

As Bill VERY CAUTIOUSLY cleaned

the original grips with linseed oil, words appeared. On the left grip was BLUE HILLS and KANS. He did a jig, then got to work.

After some floor pacing, his letter to the Kansas State Historical Society brought an enthusiastic reply. They didn't know H. A. PLEATHER from Adam's off ox, but J. PEATE was a familiar name in Kansas. He had wound up as first president of the Beverly State Bank, and lived until 1932. They included much other historical background.

Not sure it still existed, Bill wrote to the Beverly State Bank. Again, a prompt and helpful response. The current president, Mr. H. D. Campbell, as a boy had known Jack Peate personally. He sent Bill a book, various photocopies, and his own recollections of the pioneer hero.

Everyone agrees that Bill Upton's Whitney did belong to Jack Peate during his frontier experiences. If it were a hoax, a more widely-known name would have been used. Also, BLUE HILLS would mean nothing to a collector — only to Peate did it have special significance.

It is also agreed that Plether was probably the previous owner. How the revolver, dirty and neglected, found its way to Bedford, England, is no great mystery. During the Battle of Britain, in early World War II, privately owned firearms of every description were sent to England's unarmed defenders. These included many percussion arms, as I can testify. I was the Small Arms Officer on General Jimmie Doolittle's staff, and I saw these things myself.

If any reader has additional information on Jack Peate or his firearms, he may contact me through this magazine. I'll put him in touch with Bill Upton, and the help will be appreciated.

* * *

Many readers will have early arms of which they would like to know the full history. For them, Bill Upton has this advice.

Be patient. Follow the tiniest lead, and "leave no stone unturned." Particularly, clean up early pieces with great caution. Otherwise, personal identification may be obliterated before you get to see it.

Even without owner's markings, there are many avenues of research that may be followed. I'll mention a few. You will think of others.

The Dixie Gun Works catalog is a fine source. It has many lists of serial numbers by year, also inspector's marks with year, and lots more.

To learn what country the gunstock wood was grown in, contact: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Products Laboratory, Madison, Wisconsin 53705. Write them before submitting sample. Keep letter brief, but give appropriate details.

Many manufacturers will research your serial number for a modest fee. Enclose your check, and give serial number, model, caliber, barrel length and anything else that might help them. Examples of whom to contact:

Mr. Marty Huber, Historian, Colt Industries, Firearms Division, 150 Hushope Ave., Hartford, Connecticut 06102. Fee \$15.00 per gun.

Mr. R. G. Jinks, Services Operation Manager, Smith & Wesson, 2100 Roosevelt Ave., Springfield, Massachusetts 01101. Service is free but please, one gun per letter and one letter per month!

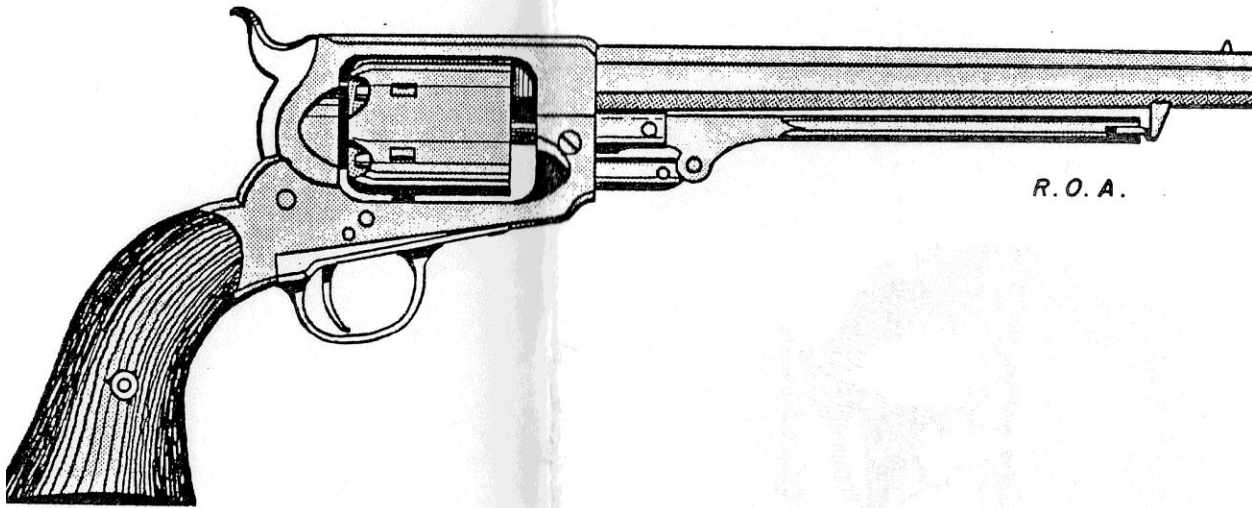
For Winchesters, write: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Winchester Collection, P.O. Box 1000, Cody, Wyoming 82414. Fee \$15.00 per gun.

Remington currently does it only for known writers. They are preparing a public service, but ask that you wait for announcement. It should be ready by late 1982.

Who knows? You could be as lucky as the collector whom Colt told that his thumb-buster had been ordered by a Mr. William Barclay Masterson. That \$15.00 fee was a sound investment. •

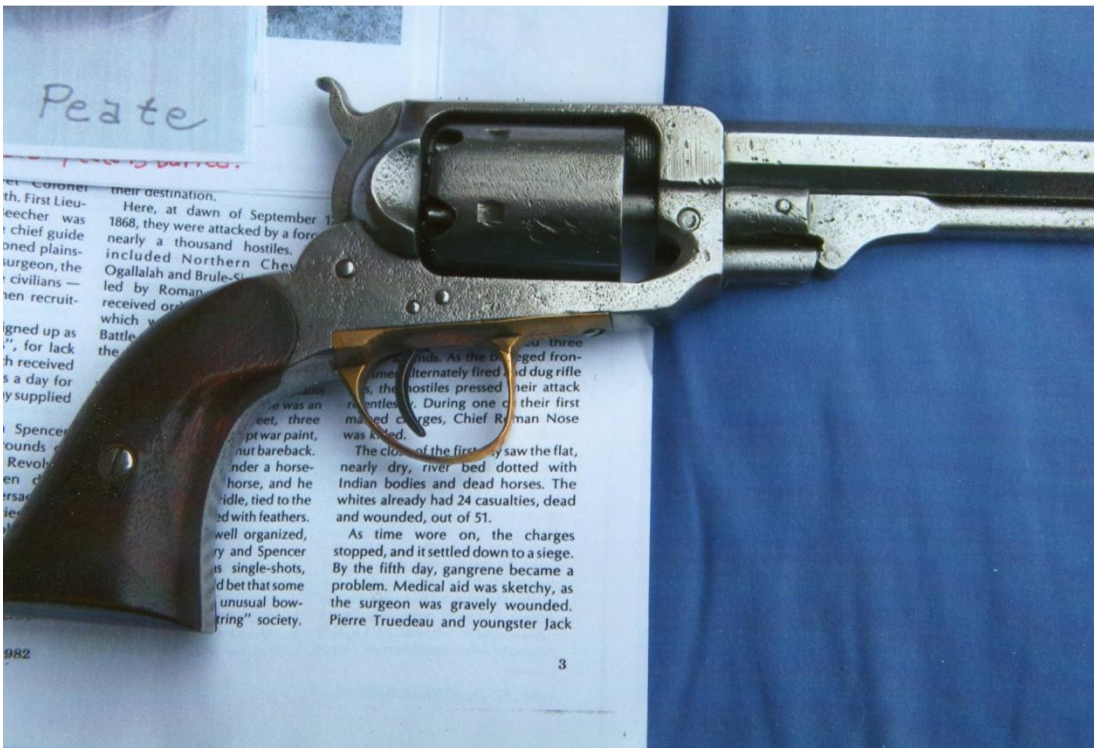
BIBLIOGRAPHY:
THRILLING DAYS IN ARMY LIFE, by General George A. Forsyth, U.S.A.
Journal of James J. Peate, Frontiersman.
Notes of Mr. Larry Jochims, Research Historian, Kansas State Historical Society.
Notes of Mr. H. D. Campbell, President, Beverly State Bank.





Reprinted from *Muzzle Blasts*, June 1982, with permission from the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, Friendship, IN 47021 (www.nmlra.org). (Thank you to Eric Bye, Muzzle Blasts Editor, for permission to reprint).





The color photos are courtesy of W. E. (Bill) Upton, of England, owner of Scout Peate's old revolver. Special acknowledgement to researcher, Joe Rosa, for locating and putting me in contact with Mr. Upton.