WINCHESTER MODEL 1910

By Nigel Utting
(British Correspondent)

It appears semi-automatic longarms were far ahead of their time 79 years ago; however, the more traditional manual bolt and lever-actions had a greater following with the military.

Much to the disappointment of the major arms and ammunition companies, it's not unknown for a newly introduced cartridge to enter the market, linger briefly, and disappear without the bulk of the shooting public giving it a fair trial . . . in some cases, even learning of its existence!

Sometimes it 's the fault of the company introducing the round: its offering being too similar to existing cartridges and presenting no significant advantages. Other times, the round itself has merit, except the gun for which it's chambered doesn't tempt the buying public's fancy; finally, it may just be a lousy cartridge!

It seems two of a quartet of Winchester cartridges, all designed for that company's early self-loading rifles, slid neatly into oblivion early this century for a mixture of the above reasons.

The baby of the group was the .32 Win. Self-loading, followed by the .35 Win. SL, the .351 Win. SL and finally the .401 Win. SL. Neither of the two smaller cartridges were exactly a powerhouse: the .32 and .35 can be matched/exceeded in power by a hot .357 or .44 magnum load respectively!

In fact, the .32 Win. SL gains the ultimate accolade by being described in *Cartridges of the World*, by Frank Barnes, as "possibly the world's most useless cartridge".

Remember 1905 was only just a decade after the introduction of America's first purpose-designed smokeless powder cartridge, the .30/30 and blackpowder loadings of old favourites would continue to be produced for years to come.

In addition, the USA has always been firmly entrenched in the lever-action ethos and bolt-guns were only to gain popularity as a result of the experience of American doughboys with their Springfields in the trenches of World War One.

So, in an era when bolt-actions were still to gain general acceptance, what chance had a low/medium-powered semi-automatic? Very little, it appears, since the Model 1905 in .32 SL and .35 SL was discontinued in 1910.

The deficiencies of the .35 SL had already stimulated the development of the .351 SL with a 27 percent great muzzle velocity and 62 percent greater muzzle energy. (Don't forget energy is a function of V2).

The high powered .351 SL-chambered Model 1907 and .401 Win. SL-chambered Model 1910 were in production for 50 and 26 years respectively. Each gained something of a reputation, the former as a coyote and puma gun, being very popular in South America; the latter as a deer and black bear gun. Both; however, were for short-range use only.

Where did my interest of Winchester self-loaders come from? To be liberal, it came in an unfinished wooden box with a lock stamped 'Calcutta'. No leather-covered case, just a fairly basic container holding both halves of a .401 self-loader.

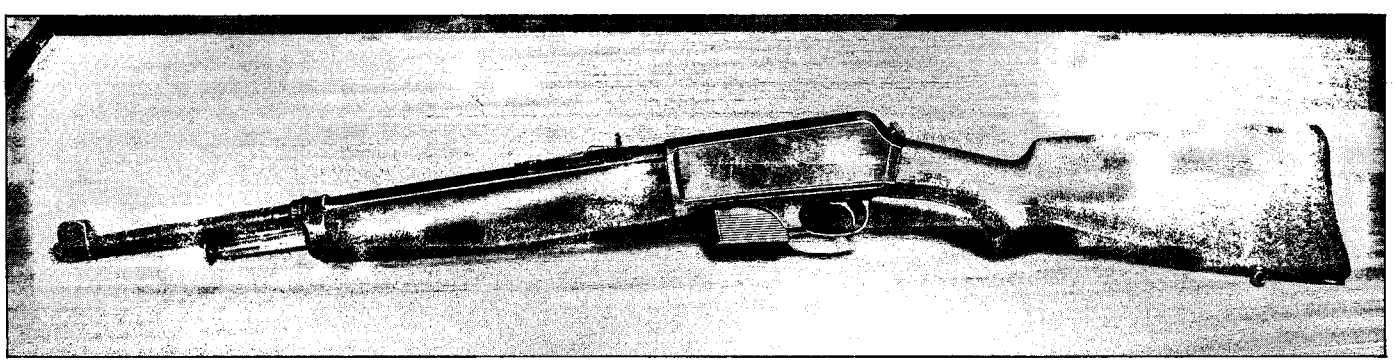
Both halves? Yes, this rifle holds several surprises, the first of which is it is a take-down model. Unscrewing a nut at the rear of the action allows the barrel to be separated from the butt and trigger-group.

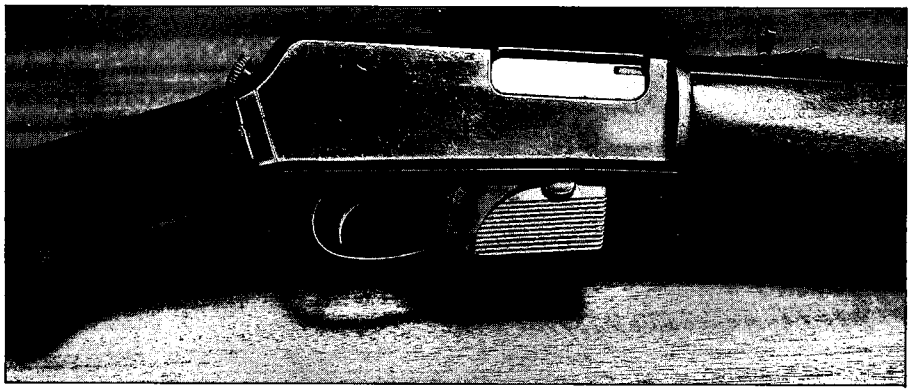
Surprise number two is the action is a simple blow-back design which lacks any form of retardation of the bolt other than inertia and the recoil-spring.

While there have been some very powerful blowbacks of .50 calibre and larger, the underlying problem is a recoil-spring sufficiently strong to prevent the bolt making an unscheduled exist through the back of the back of the action, renders the arm difficult to cock without the aid of a steam winch.

In the case of the Winchester Model 1910, the mass of the bolt plus the strength of the

Left-hand view of rifle: note the cocking plunger protruding from fore-end below the barrel.





View of right-hand side of the receiver. The safety is at the front of trigger guard. Other parts displayed are the removable magazine, take-down screw at the rear of the action and the adjustable ladder rear-sight.

The rifle's designation is stamped on the upper tang.

recoil-spring is enough to take the rear-ward forces generated by this not inconsequential cartridge.

The final surprise is the initial cocking/loading action is by pushing in a plunger situated under the fore-end, instead of pulling back on a cocking lever laterally attached to the bolt. Subsequent recocking and loading during firing is via reciprocation of the bolt as per other self-loaders.

Apart from a missing rearsight and buttplate, the rifle belonging to a shooting friend was in apparently perfect condition. Purchased in 1969, it had sat in its case untouched for some 15 years until its owner started the task of finishing the stock and forearm, replacing the sight and buttplate and tidying up the carrying case.

The case presented no problems: a quick power-sand and the application of a few coats of varnish saw to the outside; the inside now sports red velvet lining and is a far cry from the original unfinished wood and splinters.

The woodwork of the .401 had, fortunately, received no rough treatment and minor surface finishing was the only requirement. The stock was rubbed down, this time by hand and several coats of Birchwood Casey Tru-Oil were carefully applied.

The missing parts; however, were still to be replaced. The butt now carries a very similar plate from a Winchester shotgun; the rear-sight proved more difficult, but eventually a suitable sight from Brownells in the USA was fitted.

Enigmatically, while the Winchester SL cartridges met with mixed success, it is probably the weakest member of the family which will be remembered best, certainly not for its own merits, but for its contribution to the development of the .30 calibre US M1 carbine.

The .351 Model 1907 SLR had found favour in the trenches of World War One, particularly with French troops, due to its firepower and handy size in restricted spaces. The firearm was also popular with prison guards in the USA, probably for the same reasons.

Calibre	Chambered in rifle Model No.	Years rifle in major production	Bullet weight (grains)	Muzzle Velocity (fps)	Muzzle energy (fpe)
.32 Win. SL	1905	1905/6-1920	165	1400	760
.35 Win. SL	1905	1905-1920	180	1452	842
.351 Win. SL	1907	1907-1957	180	1850	1370
.401 Win. SL	1910	1910-1936	250	1870	1940

The stamped .401 cal on the bottom plate of the magazine. This calibre has long gone from gun shops.

The concept of the carbine as an intermediate between a sidearm and a full-length shoulderarm again found favour in 1940 when the U.S. Army invited designs for a 'light rifle': Weight to be roughly five pounds, effective range 300 yards, full or semi-automatic, .30 calibre, along the lines of the .32 Win. SL.

The full development of the .30 M1 carbine is another story, but the outcome was the adoption in 1941 of a Winchester-designed firearm chambered for a Winchester-designed round, being basically a .30 calibre rimless .32 SL. There's nothing like giving people what they asked for!

Unfortunately, the .30 US M1 cartridge garnered much the same reputation as its forebear, the .32 Win. SL: it just doesn't do the job. With an established .40 calibre action and round already tried and tested, it is a mystery why the U.S. army adopted a manifestly underpowered .30 calibre combination. Still, it's only the taxpayer's money.

Had the .401 been adopted in place of its smaller brother, factory ammunition might be easier to find. I saw a single batch for auction in 1983, but it proved too corroded for use; hence, it has not yet been possible to fire this excellent piece.

However, help is at hand . . . I have recently come across a source of suitable jacketed bullets and no less than three sources of .401 brass. Dies for reloading are listed in C-H Tool & Die Corporation's catalogue and it would seem shooting the .401 will be possible. As soon as I have had chance to work up handloads, a full report will follow.

Reloading for an oldie may not be a cut-price affair, but to hear the 'thump' of an obsolete calibre is a rare and beautiful sound!

Postscript: Since writing the main body of this article, I have by pure chance met with one of the early owners of this exact rifle.

He managed to shoot the .401 with a batch of factory ammunition; however, a dud round and a careless follow-up shot caused a ringed barrel behind the original fore-sight.

The barrel was therefore truncated behind the fore-sight (at the rear of the bulge) and the fore-sight from a German military rifle was added. **O**