

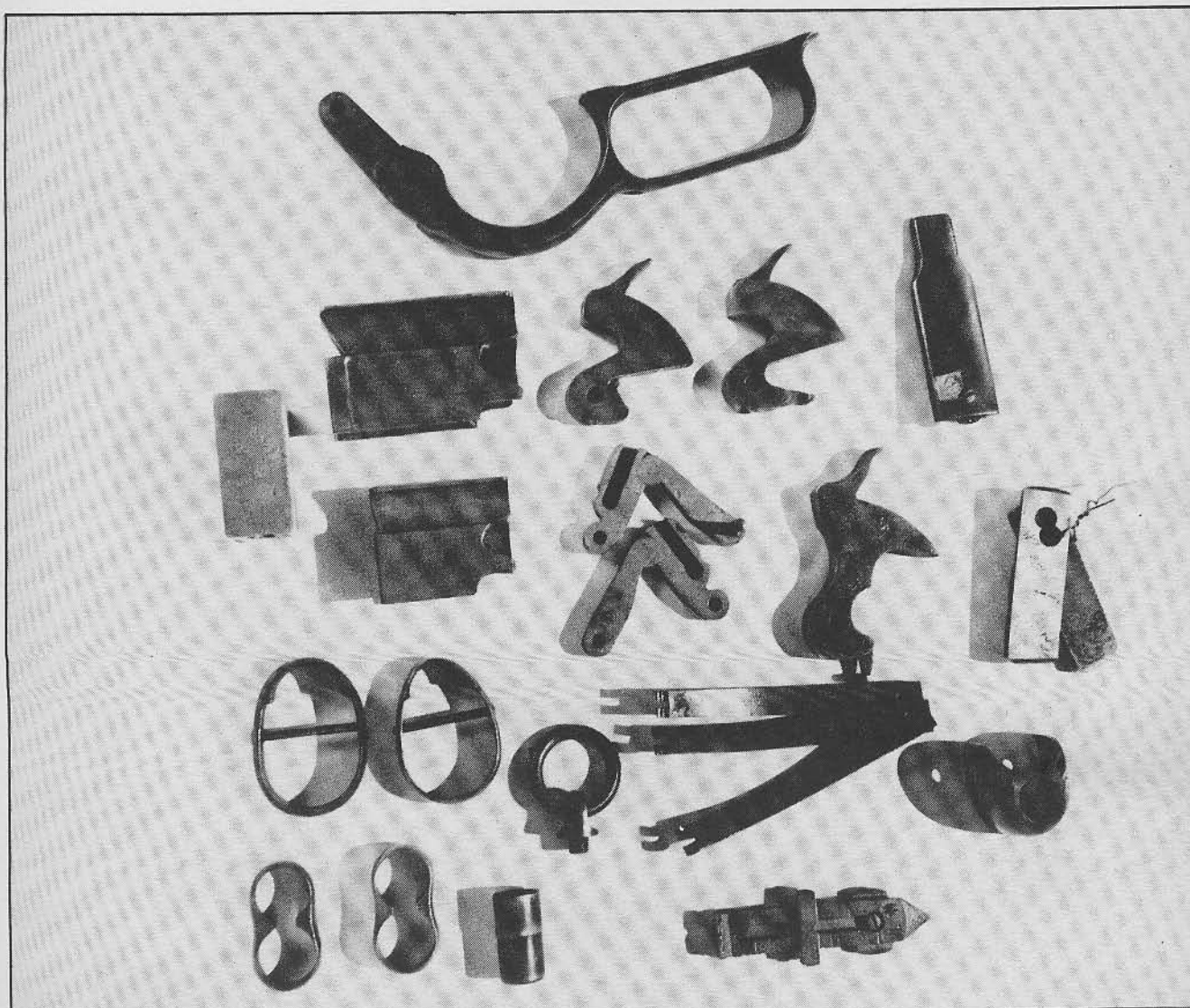
Chapter 16

THERE'S GOLD IN THAT RUST

While A Firearm May Appear To Be Nothing But Junk, Its Parts Can Be Worth A Modest Fortune

Over a century old, these ancient revolver parts have considerable value today. Top row includes Colt single-action hammers, a Colt Pocket Model loading lever. Second row shows Colt percussion hammers, mainsprings and cylinder pins. At bottom are Remington 1858 Army hammers and cylinder locking blocks. All are old but in perfect usable condition.





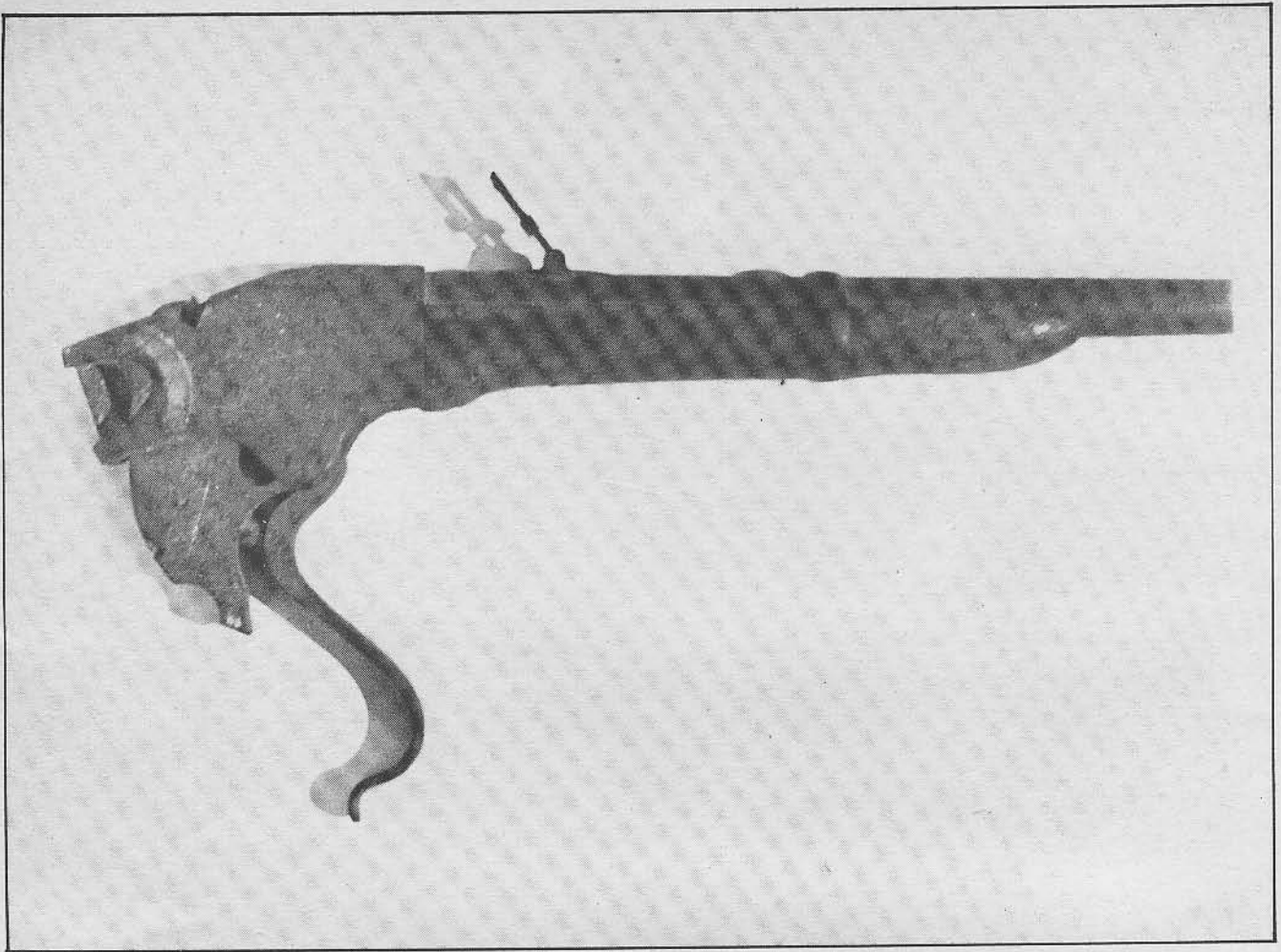
Old Winchester parts are in great demand. Shown are 1873 lever, brass cartridge carriers, hammers, a slide cover, mainsprings, a forend cap, folding rear sight, barrel bands, action toggles and carbine ring. All were salvaged from rifles and carbines that could not be restored properly, under any logical circumstances.

IN CALIFORNIA, there's an old saying that goes, "There's gold in them thar hills." It originated during the Great Gold Rush of 1849. Today, more than 130 years later, this saying is still true, but in a totally different sense.

There's still a lot of gold in those hills, whether it be California or Kalamazoo. However, the gold of which I speak isn't the beautiful yellow color of aurum — or AU, meaning gold. This wealth, instead, tends to be a deep red-dish color and in the form of a crust that tends to accumulate on iron and steel when exposed, or even partially exposed, to the raw elements. I'm talking about old, rusty guns!

Many times I have had someone ask, "What do you want with that old piece of rusty junk?" when I offered some rust-caked rifle or pistol for their examination. Little did they know that the old piece of seemingly rusty junk perhaps had far more value than a solid gold nugget. I personally have found guns for over a period of some forty years that had considerable value. Some were rusted solid, while many others had merely a thin coating of rust film over their entire exterior surfaces.

These guns, for the most part, dated from about 1835 to as late as the early part of this century. All had varying degrees of historical significance and some were worthy of being restored to some semblance of their original condi-



This old Spencer carbine is beyond repair, yet has some valuable parts intact amid the rust. Wooden forend, the folding rear sight, lever and breech block all can be recovered with careful removal and proper cleaning.

tion; some were best left as-is for their relic value. Still others of much later vintage, but today considered obsolete, retained value in what might be salvaged from them in the way of rare gun parts.

Some months ago, I ran across an old 1886 Winchester that had seen a lot of service over the years, then had been hung in the barn to accumulate rust and barnyard dirt. This once fine old rifle was a mess! The stock and forend possibly could be restored to some degree of usability, but most of the screws had been badly chewed up with the use of ill-fitting screwdrivers in past years.

I decided to strip down the entire rifle for the parts that might be salvaged as usable. Many of the screws had to be drilled out, using extreme care to not damage the threads of the receiver into which they were threaded. The first parts to come free were the lever and bolt locks. They were in

perfect condition except for a thin film of rust. Then came the internal parts, all of them in great shape except for years of accumulated dirt and rust. The magazine tube was deeply pitted with advanced rust and badly dented, so it was discarded. The loading gate in the receiver and its screw were saved, as was the forend cap and front barrel band.

Each of these parts was left to soak for several days in kerosene, then was buffed on a fine wire buffer. All turned out to be nice, clean, usable parts showing little or no wear; in fact, the hammer still showed some case-hardening on its surface.

I had bought this rusted old dog for literally peanuts, and the rancher who sold it to me was glad to get rid of what he called, "a rusty piece of junk." I sold all of those parts to one man, who was more than elated to get them. In fact, he

thought I was some kind of nut to let them go so cheaply. He paid me \$200 for the works. The hammer alone he valued at \$50, but later sold it to another collector for around \$100 in cash and trade.

The moral, of course, lies in the fact that there is money to be made from seeking out old guns and reselling them. If they are restorable, this should be accomplished prior to resale for a better price. If not worthy of the time for restoration, it still is logical to dismantle them for the usable parts.

Most of us who have been in the gun field for many years have come to realize some obsolete gun parts are like gold, especially when they are difficult to find in usable condition. Modern-made replacement parts are available for some older model rifles and pistols, but these are usually rough castings. There can never be a substitute for original parts, if a gun is to be considered authentic. Hence, collectors and arms restoration experts are always on the lookout for genuine parts of obsolete firearms, especially those of American manufacture.

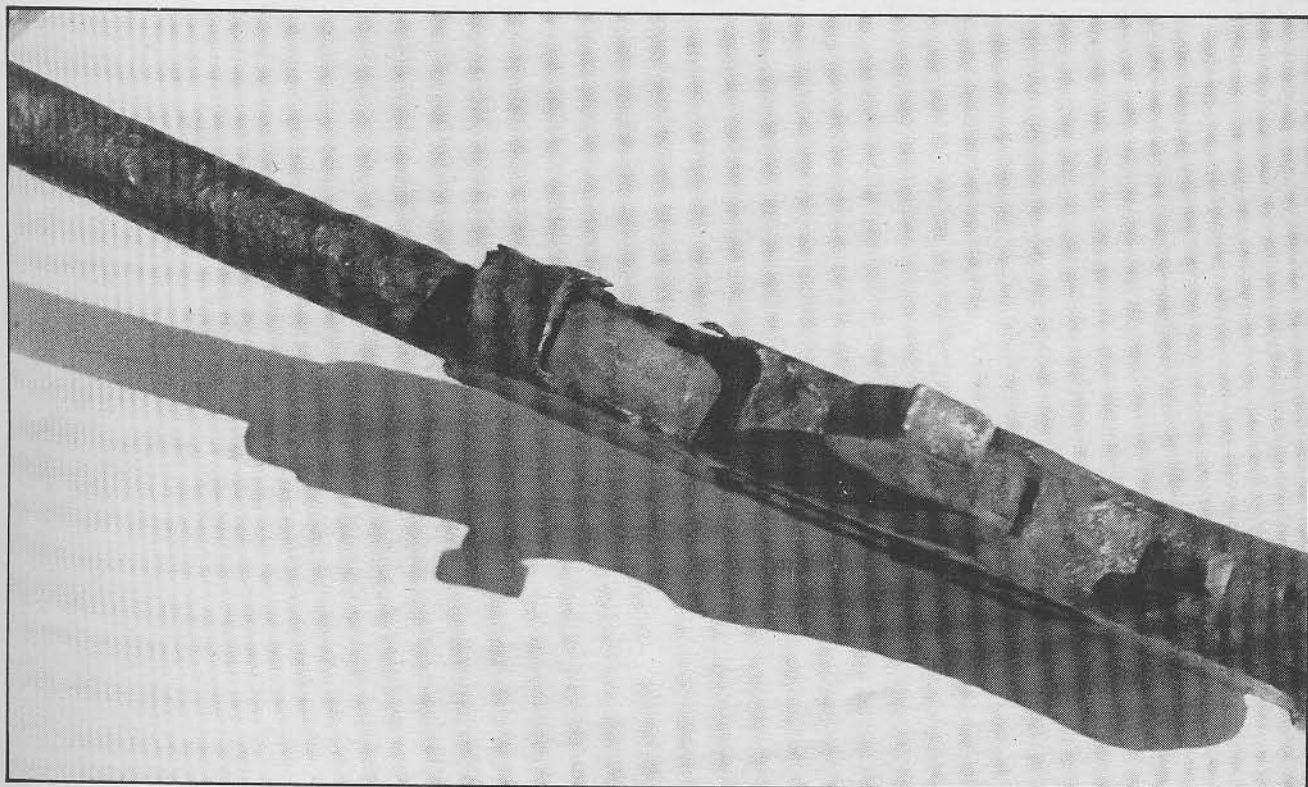
Some of the most sought-after gun parts in America

today are those for such guns as pre-war Colt Single Actions; any of the early Winchester rifles or carbines, including the 1866, 1873, 1876, 1886, 1892 models and some early versions of the 1894. Early Marlins, Savages, Remingtons and others of American manufacture all have considerable value for their parts alone.

Probably the most sought-after of early gun parts would be those for the various early Colt revolvers of the percussion era. These include — to name but a few — the 1849 Pocket Model, 1851 Navy, 1860 Army, 1861 Navy and the Walker and three Dragoon models. The early Remington percussion models, such as the 1858 .44 Army revolver, the various new models of the Army and Navy pistols, the Beals models and on into the cartridge models that include the 1875 Army, 1890 Army and all the various derringer-type and single-shots in between all have parts that are in great demand by collectors today.

What has been said is not to mean one should acquire any of the above described guns that are in reasonably good condition, then junk it for parts. No way! Any of these guns in decent condition are worth far more than the mere

This is the Yuba River Winchester discussed in the text. Brass cartridge carrier, unaffected by countless years of submersion in running water, is worth at least \$50. Author is undecided whether to salvage the gun parts.



parts even if they are in what might be termed as usable condition. In speaking of guns that might be dismantled for sale of parts, I am referring only to those that are beyond repair or restoration and have no special historical significance.

I own a number of fine, old rusty guns that probably have a small fortune in rare parts hidden beneath their rusty exteriors. However, I found these guns in the immediate area of the 1849 California Gold Rush claims and would never think of tearing them up for the parts. To me, at least, these guns have real historic character. If they could talk, what stories they might tell.

One gun that I found in the Yuba River of the California gold country is an 1873 Winchester rifle. Deeply pitted, it had no stock or forend, the side plates were missing and all of the internal iron parts were completely rusted away. In closely examining this piece, I found that the brass cartridge carrier and its elevator were in comparatively fine condition. These two parts could be salvaged by making a couple of cuts with a hacksaw across both sides of the rusted iron receiver. Such action, however, would ruin completely a relic that might be worth about \$20 to an interested collector.

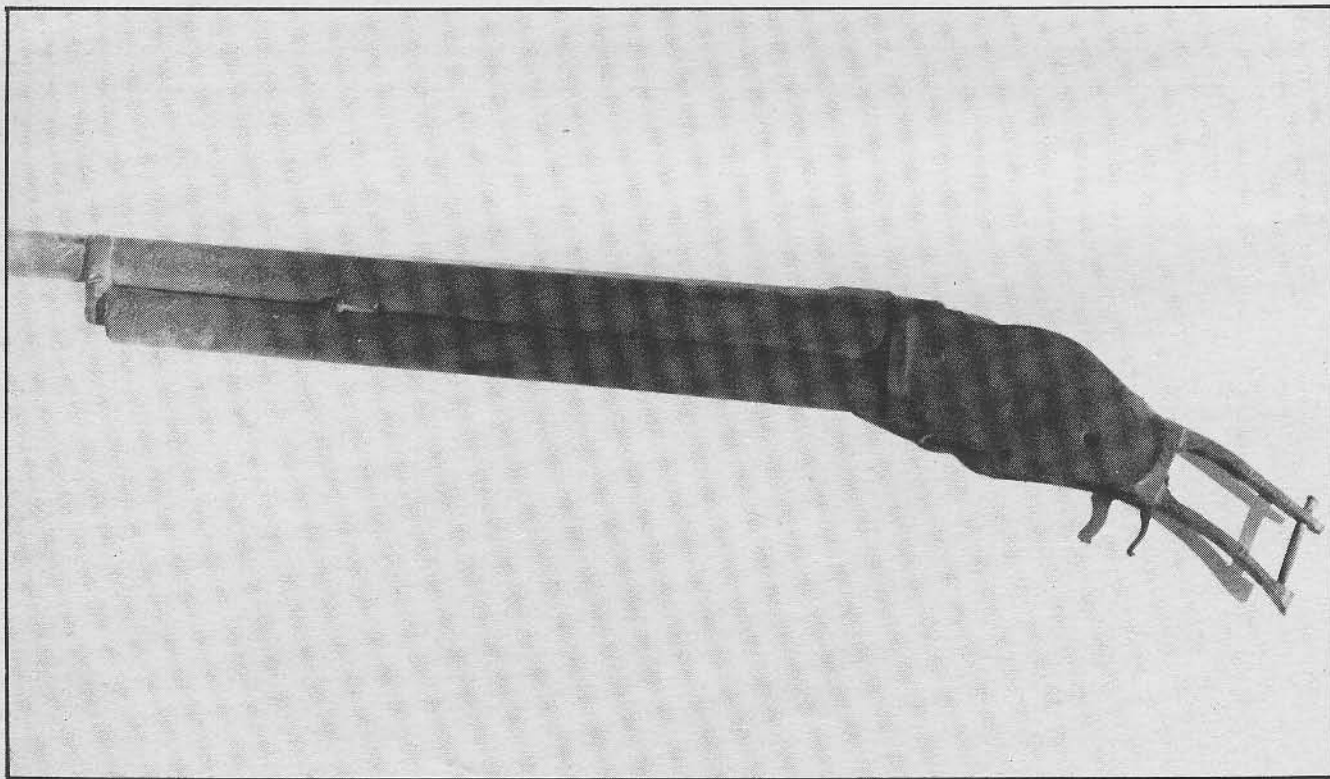
A friend recently offered me \$50 for the brass cartridge carrier and elevator, if I would remove them from the surrounding junk. To this day, I haven't made up my mind whether to let him have these parts or just leave this old relic as it is for posterity; a hard decision, indeed.

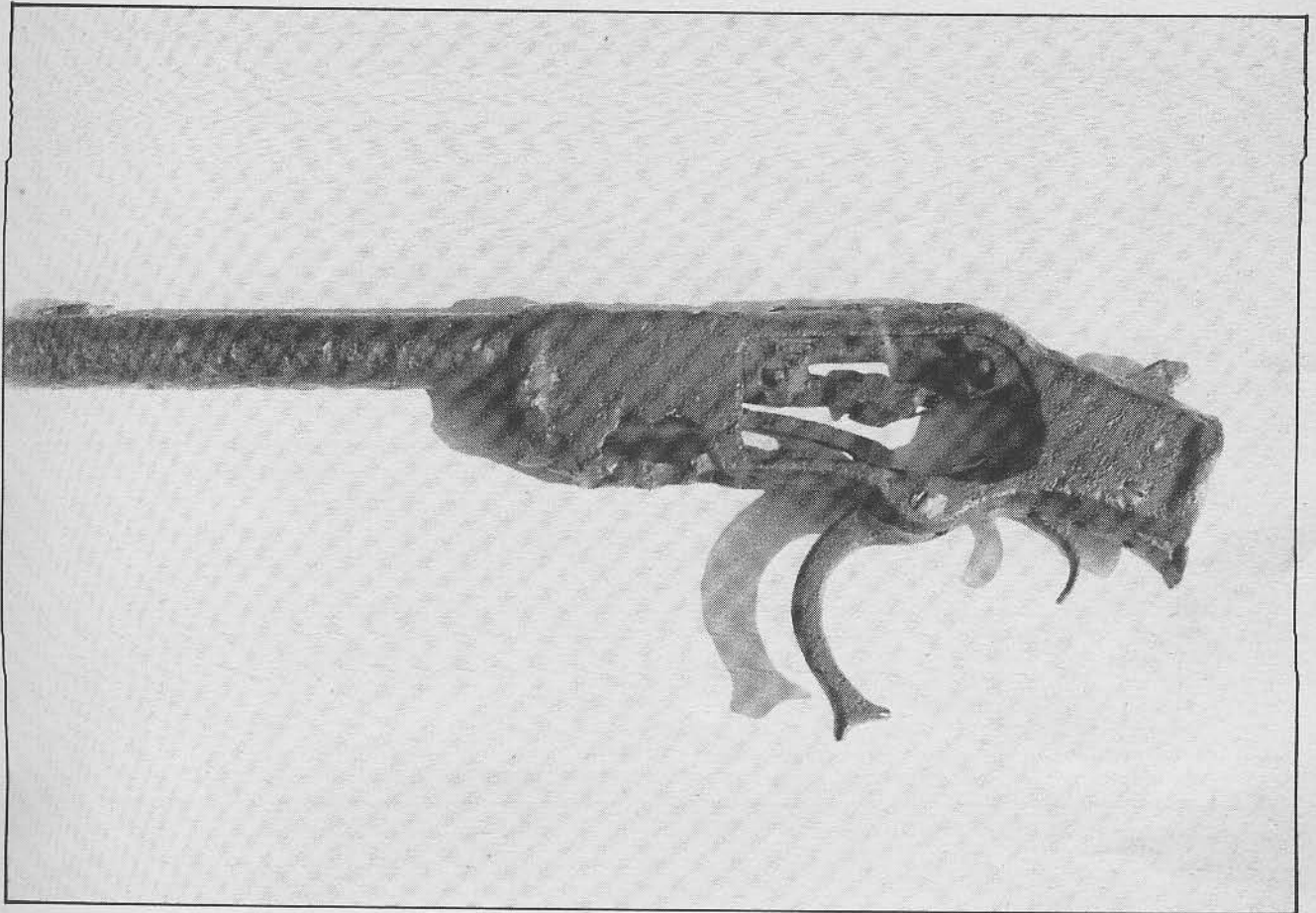
Some thirty years ago, I bought a quantity of old arsenal Colt Single-Action hammers and parts, a quantity of 1858 Remington hammers, as well as parts for both the Remington Navy and Beals models. All of these parts were in unused condition, still showing their bright color case-hardening and blued finish. I got these parts from a man I consider to be the dean of antique gun writers as well as a dear friend, James E. Serven.

To this day, I still have some of these extremely rare parts on hand. I bought them for what would be considered peanuts today; they have real value now. For the hammers alone, I have received offers of as much as a hundred bucks each. I still refuse to sell them simply because, when these are gone, there won't be any more. I'll just continue to hoard them for my own use in restoration work.

There are several knowledgeable individuals who foresaw the potential value of obsolete gun parts. Turner Kirkland of the Dixie Gun Works became interested in fire-

This Model 1887 Winchester shotgun has had its internal parts removed. It is beyond salvage, but the parts from this relic, in time, will be utilized to restore other guns of the same model that are in need of major repair.





In this view, the deep pitting and erosion of the barrel and receiver are evident on author's Yuba River find. The lever has been broken off, which may be the reason it ended up in the river in California's Mother Lode.

arms at an early age and today is considered the largest dealer in antique gun parts in the country, if not the world. He will be the first to tell you that there is profit in ancient and obsolete guns and their parts.

For the beginning gunsmith, even if on a hobby basis, the search for and acquisition of old rifles and pistols will lead to one thing: he always will have spare parts on hand when he needs them. Say, for instance, that you are working on an old Model 1873 Winchester for which one of the sideplates is missing as well as a couple of screws. It is a good feeling to be able to pull out the spare parts drawer in your workbench and have, instantly at hand, those needed parts.

I know any number of amateur gunsmiths who attend gun shows, not to sell from a table, but to search out usable but obsolete gun parts among the carefully displayed debris covering many a sale table. On occasion, one can hit the jackpot at these affairs. I once bought a complete Henry cleaning rod for two bucks off a table cluttered with

everything from cheap imported novelties to hub caps. The owner had no idea of what he had. It was just another old rifle cleaning rod to him. Actual value for this early model Henry rod was fifty bucks at that time.

Another time I found an Express rifle sight battery on a table filled with mostly non-gun related items (this was supposed to have been a gun show). The price for this sight battery was marked on a sticker tag as \$5. I figured that if the seller was so uninformed as to price an item like an Express rifle sight battery at only five bucks, I would offer him three! He took it and I later sold this sight battery to another custom rifle builder for \$150!

Simply because a gun is old and has a liberal coating of rust on its interior and exterior doesn't mean that it is a junker. There is a good possibility that even the amateur home gun mechanic can restore it to working condition. If not, such a firearm still has a potential of a small gold mine tucked away in its interior in usable and often rare parts.