



# A "DOC" CARVER GUN

by Art Gogan

The accompanying photos detail some of the features of the Winchester Model 1894 Deluxe .32-.40 caliber carbine No. 621436. The silver medallion inlet into its buttstock reads:

PRESENTED TO  
W.F. DOC CARVER  
WORLD'S CHAMPION  
FROM  
COL. ZACK MILLER  
101 RANCH  
W.R.A.CO.

Eleven special-ordered features are noted, including Style 7 engraving by Gough, presentation inscribed medallion, pistol grip with cap, shotgun-style butt, steel buttplate checkered in Style I, sling eyes, no saddle ring, nickel-steel barrel (special order for .32-.40 caliber) and ivory bead front sight.

Most gun enthusiasts have some awareness of the name of "Doc" Carver, but factual information about him is hard to come by. Indeed, history seems almost to have looked away from William Frank Carver and it does not seem to be unintentional. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's fame and Doc Carver's infamy are not unrelated.

Born the first son of Winslow, Illinois, physician William D. Carver, on May 7, 1851, he grew up in Winslow, and in his teens, took up the study of dentistry under his father. At the age of twenty, in 1871, he went to Nebraska where he set himself up in the Fort McPherson/North Platte area as Doctor William F. Carver, Dentist. Predictably, the people of the area called him "Doc," and the name stuck for the rest of his days.

Through the years of his showman's life, Doc always denied that he had ever been a dentist. As he told it, his father nicknamed him "Doc" in recognition of his tendency to bring home and care for injured wild animals while he was a young boy in Illinois. The Nebraska newspaper advertisements of the period, which tout the high quality of his dentistry, belie these denials. This compulsion to exaggerate and embellish even the most innocuous story reflects the boastful and fanciful ego that seems to have done the real harm to the legacy of Doc Carver.

In the world of entertainers it is rare indeed that quirks or twists of personality, even the most eccentric or offensive, are given sufficient notice to taint the fame which accrues to those who excel in some performance skill. William Frank "Doc" or "Dr." Carver seems to be among those unfortunate



Dr. William F. Carver in full evening attire. This photograph is thought to be circa 1896.

few who have not benefited from this myopia of the entertained masses.

From his boyhood days in Illinois, Doc had always shown a pronounced ability and interest in shooting. During his years as a dentist in Nebraska and later in Oakland, California, he honed his shooting skills until January of 1878, when he embarked on a West Coast to East Coast tour to demonstrate his remarkable marksmanship in over 30 major U.S. cities in ten months. That tour marked the beginning of Doc's national and world acclaim as a rifle marksman.

That he was an exceptional exhibition shooter, there seems to be little doubt. Two books on Carver — his autobiography entitled *The Life of Dr. Wm. F. Carver of California, Champion Rifle Shot of the World* published in 1878, and a biography titled *Doc W.F. Carver, Spirit Gun of the West* by Raymond W. Thorp, published in 1957 — reprint numerous newspaper and magazine articles that relate Carver's shooting feats in considerable detail from the earliest, in 1878, to near the end of the century. The sixteen Carver scrapbooks held by the Buffalo Bill Historical Center contain many additional clippings of such articles. I have not yet found primary evidence of Carver shooting publicly after 1896. He did, however, remain in public life, touring the

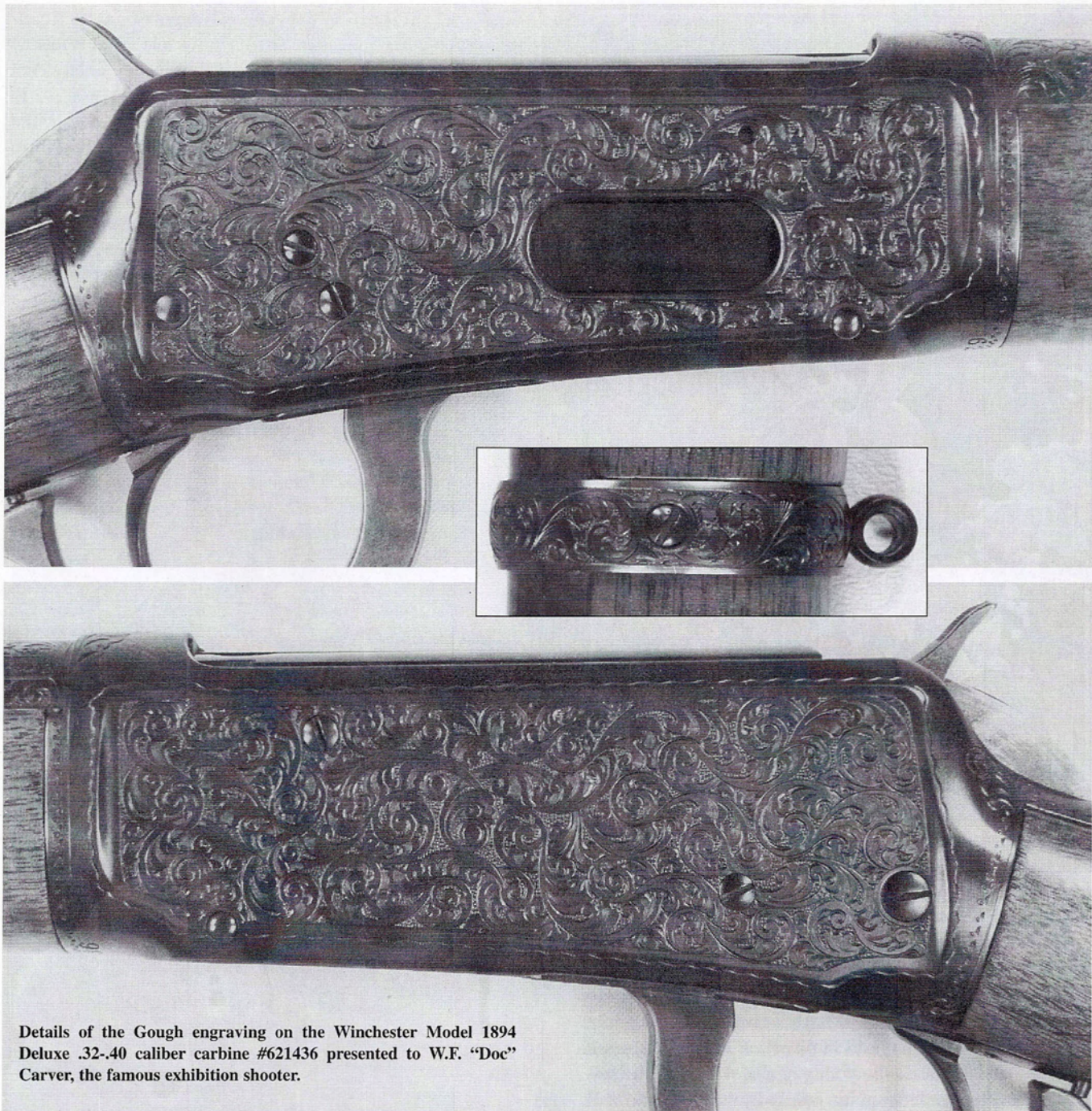
country with a Diving Horse Act that performed at amusement parks, fairs and other events, until his death in 1927. He is credited with the origination of these performances that featured horses trained to jump from a high platform into a pool of water. That story will be found in the book *A Girl and Five Brave Horses* by Sonora Carver.

Doc was a big man (six foot, two-and-one-half inches, and 247 pounds at age 34) with a big ego and a big temper. It is reported that on one occasion during a performance, having missed a shot, he became so angered that he clubbed his horse with the rifle and punched his assistant in the face. We might be tempted to think that if he were a humbler man, he would perhaps have been more kindly treated by history, but that certainly would not explain the lasting awe and reverence Americans have for Doc's business partner.

In 1883, "Doc" Carver and "Buffalo Bill" Cody joined as full partners to produce the first Wild West Show. The show, billed as "The Wild West — Hon. W.F. Cody and Dr. W.F. Carver's Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition," opened in Omaha on May 19th of that year. Carver and Cody did not work well together, and the partnership ended with the end of the show's first season. The flamboyant Cody could match Carver's ego with little effort, but Cody's



A rare advertising handbill for the performance at Beacon Park in Boston. It dates from 1882, the first and only season of the Cody & Carver "Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition."



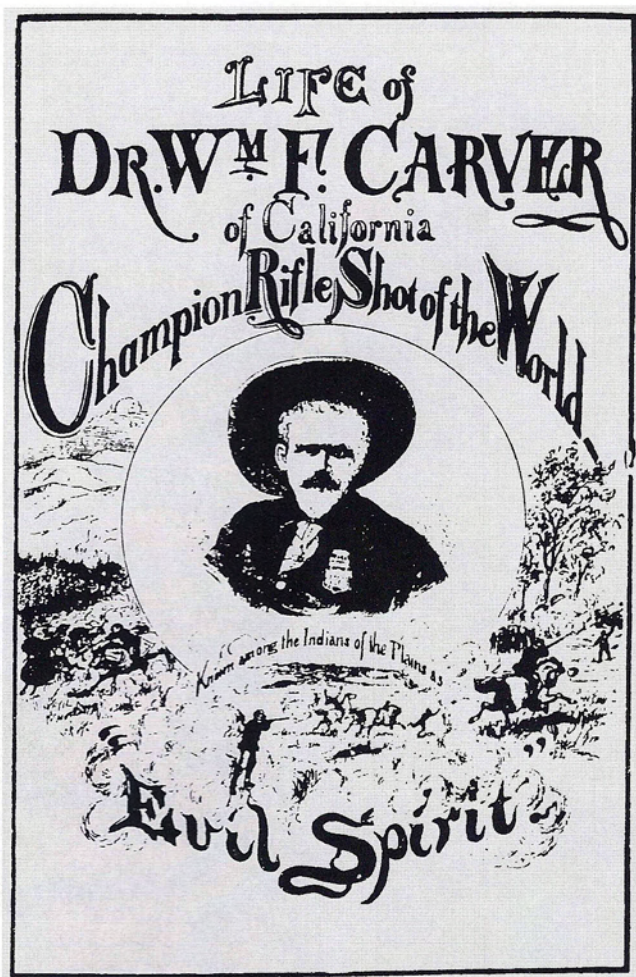
Details of the Gough engraving on the Winchester Model 1894 Deluxe .32-.40 caliber carbine #621436 presented to W.F. "Doc" Carver, the famous exhibition shooter.

glitter dazzled the fickle public, while Carver's self-centered personality shone through what little, if any, effort he may have made to conceal it.

If only ability and skill were to be judged, surely few who objectively assessed the two would deny that Cody, as a marksman, was far outclassed by Carver, but Cody was clearly the better showman. After the first show season, Carver organized his own Wild West Show, and both men continued as Wild West Show owners, operators and performers, and also as bitter competitors and personal enemies, until about 1893 when Carver disbanded his show.

Twenty years later, the stock and other assets of the financially bankrupt "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill Lillie's Far East" show were sold at auction on September 15, 1913, in Denver. The Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West Show was one of the buyers.

Doc Carver, as a man and as a marksman, has been blindly praised by his supporters and severely defamed by his detractors. As is so often the case, neither characterization precisely fits the real Doc Carver. It seems quite clear that, given the state of development of the arms and ammunition of his day, Doc was truly one of the best, if not the



The cover of Doc Carver's 1878 autobiography.

best, exhibition shooter the world had seen to that time. Doc was also, unfortunately, a man with an offensive ego and an absolute aversion to unexaggerated truth.

In order to get some idea of Doc's self importance, we need only contemplate what type of a man would be so presumptuous as to write his autobiography at age 27. A reader of that work who happens to have searched out the actual facts is left shaking his head in disbelief. Here, Doc would have us believe that at the young age of 4 he was the sole survivor of the massacre of his family by Indians, who took him captive and raised him, as an Indian, to young manhood. It is reliably reported that while in the North Platte area, he did homestead on Medicine Creek, just north of Stockville, Nebraska. Here, it is said, he met and trapped with the old mountain-man guide and Indian fighter John Nelson. Nevertheless, his claims to living, hunting and fighting Indians on the Western plains for all the years prior to his time as an exhibition shooter are nearly identical to Cody's early stage performances and dime novels, and the autobiography, being just a couple of years later than Cody's theater work, leaves one to wonder how much of Cody's material was appropriated for it.

It is no small tribute to the effectiveness of Carver's ability to stretch the truth that even his grave marker in Winslow bears the fictitious birth date he claims in his book. That memorial, placed by the local American Legion Post 592 in the late 1940s, carries the birth date of May 7, 1840, while the Carver family bible and the 1860 U.S. Census confirm his birth in 1851.

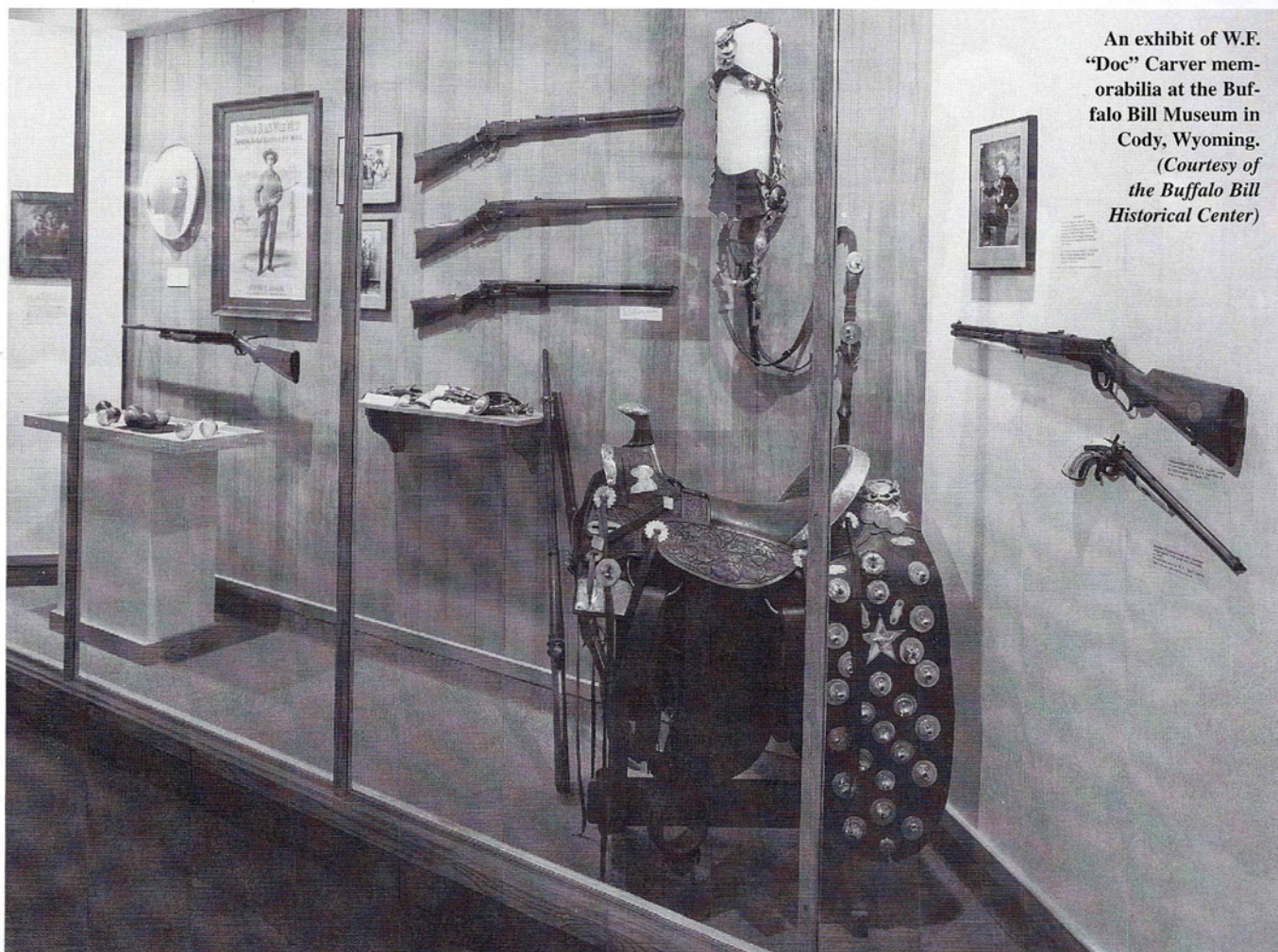
But he certainly could shoot. Ignoring his own pompous accounts of his prowess, we find proof in newspaper and sporting magazine commentaries on his marksmanship demonstrations before thousands of awed spectators and reporters. Exhibitions of his skill were reported in glowing terms in the prominent newspapers of virtually every state and in all the major sporting magazines of the period.

During one of his most widely acclaimed exhibitions, he hit 60,016 out of 64,881 wooden blocks thrown into the air in six straight days of continuous shooting beginning on January 12, 1885, in New Haven, Connecticut. The second day's score was 10,249 hits out of 11,108 shots; that is less than an 8% miss rate. To shoot the 64,881 rounds in six days he would have to have fired an average of 10,813 shots per day. If we speculate ten hours of shooting per day, he had to complete over 1,081 shots per hour or 18 shots per minute, which is about one shot every 3.3 seconds. To appreciate the enormity of that task, consider that he had to raise to his



Probably the best-known photograph of Doc Carver, this is believed to be from about 1880, near the height of his fame.

*(Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center)*



An exhibit of W.F. "Doc" Carver memorabilia at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. (Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center)

shoulder the nine-pound, .22 cal. Model 1873 Winchester rifle at least once every 25 shots (assuming the .22 Short chambering), or about once every 1½ minutes, and operate the lever about once every 3 seconds, while firing aimed shots at airborne targets. (Assistants cooled, cleaned and loaded the guns for him.)

Not impressed? Take your Model 1873 rifle and try it for an hour without firing a shot, just operating the action 1,000 times, raising and lowering the rifle once between every 25 "shots." Doc did it continuously for six straight days, outdoors, in January.

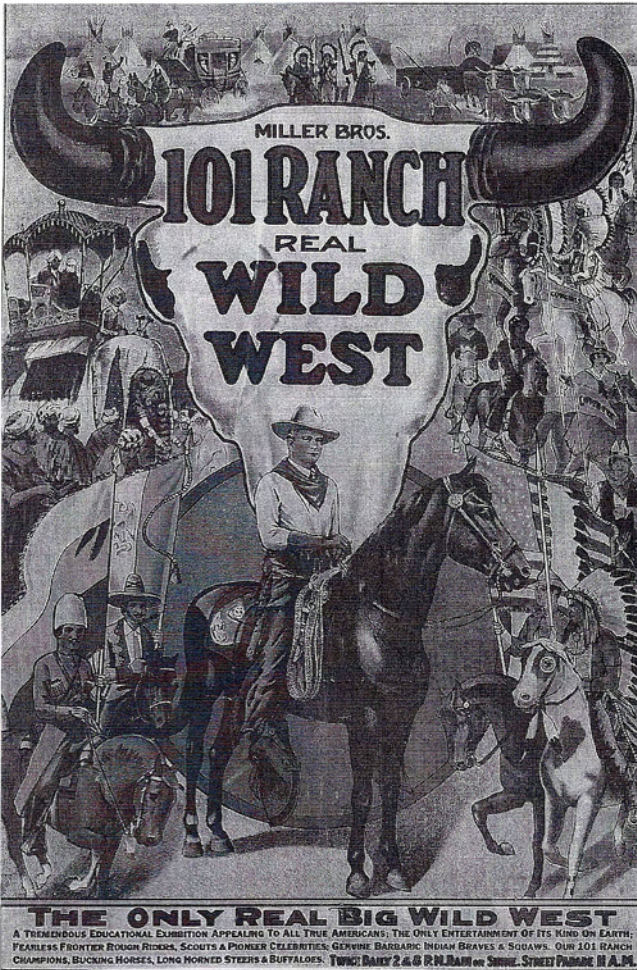
One of the more critical reviews of Carver's shooting abilities was an article by E.L. Stevenson in the August 1930 edition of *Outdoor Life* magazine. The article was a response to a series of four articles by Raymond Thorp earlier that year in *Outdoor Life*. Raymond Thorp has probably written more about Doc Carver than any other author, but his writings mostly contain a glut of shameless adoration. In these four articles, Thorp's unabashed praise of Carver would have made Doc himself blush, and Stevenson was there to take him to task. But Mr. Stevenson's criticism was as biased as Thorp's praise. Conveniently ignoring all factors other than the final scores, the shooting records of

Adolph Topperwein and Capt. A.H. Hardy were cited at length as having eclipsed Doc's accomplishments. Captain Hardy, at least, didn't agree. I have a copy of a letter from Hardy to Earl Brininstool dated June 1944, in which he says that comparing Carver to Topperwein is "...like comparing Barney Oldfield's first track record with a Ford at 25 miles per hour with what he was able to do later with improved models." In the letter, he explores the comparisons by noting that he used semi-smokeless powder and Topperwein used smokeless, while Carver had only black powder available; and he compared the nine-pound weight of Carver's Model 1873 Winchesters to the five and three quarters pounds of the Winchester Models 1890 and 1903 he and Topperwein used, giving due emphasis to the short-stroke slide action and auto-loading designs incorporated into those rifles. Carver's records surely have been beaten, but not with the equipment of his time.

Winchester arms were prominent in Doc's battery, but by no means exclusive. Both Carver's and Thorp's books tell of a matched pair of engraved and rosewood-stocked Model 1873s presented to Doc in Oakland on February 22, 1878. A photograph of him with a rifle that could fit that description is shown on the previous page. The photo is thought to be

*Story continued on page 38.*

Story continued from page 35.



An undated advertising handbill for the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch "Real Wild West" Show.

circa 1880. During the marathon shoot at New Haven in 1885, Doc used six Winchester Model 1873, .22 caliber rifles. A Model 1886 rifle has been displayed, in company with the carbine that is featured in this article, at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. That display also exhibits shotguns, a "trapdoor" rifle, and other makes and types of guns attributed to his shooting career. He did give shotgun performances and often competed against the most accomplished trapshooters of the time. The well-known names Adam Bogardus, Ira Paine and E.E. Stubbs were all to be found in high-stakes challenge matches with Carver.

In response to oft-expressed accusations from the audience at his shooting exhibitions that his rifles were smooth-bored for shot or otherwise "rigged," Doc routinely requested and received from the spectators or from local sporting goods merchants, rifles of any and all types that they wished to offer, along with appropriate store-stock ammunition, and with these, continued unhindered with his show of hitting thrown coins, marbles, stones and whatever else the fans might wish, out of the air. Doc's saddle, heavily ornamented with bullet-pierced coins from his marksman performances, can be seen as part of the Buffalo Bill Museum

exhibit of Carver memorabilia. William Frank "Doc" Carver died in California on August 31, 1927.

"Colonel" Zachary T. (Zack) Miller (1878–1952) was the second of three sons of George W. Miller, Oklahoma pioneer, Indian benefactor, and founder of the 101 Ranch near present-day Ponca City in northern Oklahoma. Although the ranch dates to earlier years, the "101" name and brand were adopted in 1881. Under the management and ownership of the three brothers, the ranch grew to 110,000 acres of unrivaled fame during the turn of the century era. In 1906, the 101 Ranch Wild West Show was formed as a touring show, and although it was some years behind the Buffalo Bill and Doc Carver shows, it was eminently successful in the U.S. and Europe until disrupted in 1916 by World War I. The show returned to prominence in the U.S. from 1925 to 1931. The 101 Ranch Wild West Show was, by all measurements, a much more fabulous and elaborate show than any of its predecessors. Zack was the "showman," brother George was the "finance man," and brother Joe was the "businessman." This triumvirate was indomitable during the years of their ventures. The Ranch and the Show were world famous.

The Model 1894 carbine featured in this article was acquired from Zack Miller by noted Western author and Indian Wars historian Earl A. Brininstool. According to the typewritten Brininstool letter, which has remained with the gun, he acquired it while he was at the 101 Ranch to research an article he intended to write on the history of the ranch. The letter is to the prominent early southern California collector M.C. Clark. Miller told Brininstool that Carver had left the gun at the ranch years earlier and had never returned for it. Though the date of this acquisition has not been determined, it is assumed to have been after Carver's death in 1927 and before, or during, the 101's economic collapse, a victim of the Great Depression, in the 1931–1936 period. By some accounts, Zack Miller was



"Colonel" Zack Miller, Manager of the 101 Ranch Wild West Shows.

Sept 15, 1946  
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Mr Clark :

I use this letter as you requested which will identify the 1894 Winchester Serial No # 621436 -- Cal 32-40 I obtained this arm of Carvers from Col Zack miller of the IOI ranch in Oklahoma when I was there doing an article on the history of the ranch. Carver had left it at the ranch years before and never returned for it . It was discolored from being in an old leather case so I sent it to Winchester a few years ago before the war and had it restored to original condition. I thought it should look like it's original condition and I liked it better that way, and hope you do as it is an interesting piece. Enjoy it with my blessing.

Most Sincerely,  
E.A. Brininstool.

*E.A. Brininstool*

(above) This letter has remained with the Doc Carver gun to the present time.

(right) Author and reporter Earl Alonzo Brininstool, c. 1914.

still selling 101 Ranch guns into the 1940s but, as the letter indicates, Brininstool had the gun "before the war."

Earl Alonzo Brininstool was born in Warsaw, New York, on October 11, 1870. He moved to Los Angeles, California, in 1895 and worked as a reporter, columnist, editorial writer and special writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, *Los Angeles Record* and *Los Angeles Express* during the 1900-1914 period. A prolific freelance writer from 1915 until his death on July 28, 1957, he was well known for his early books on the Indian Wars period, with the titles *A Trooper With Custer* and *Fighting Indian Warriors*, among others, being familiar to Indian Wars buffs. The *American Rifleman*, *Hunter*, *Trader*, *Trapper* and other Western and outdoors periodicals frequently published his writings. His personal papers, manuscripts and correspondence files (held in the special collections of the libraries at the University of Texas at Austin and at Brigham Young University at Provo, Utah) reveal his gun collecting activities and membership in the southern California arms collectors' associations. In 1985, Mrs. Merrill Brininstool, widow of Earl's son Merrill, told me that she recalled that Earl had worked for Winchester prior to moving to California, but I have been unable to confirm that.

A fragment of the history of those fast-moving, thrill-amminute Wild West Shows, and of three of the most famous men in that business, this Winchester is a great memento of bygone days when the sport of shooting was more popular than golf, and when the names of the great marksmen of the day were as oft-heard in the barber shop as are those of famous basketball players today.

I am presently "stalled" on three tracks. Perhaps *Man at Arms* readers can help.

- When, and under what circumstances, did Doc Carver interact with the 101 Ranch and/or Zack Miller?
- When did Brininstool visit the 101 Ranch?
- Was his article on the 101 Ranch ever published, and if so, where?



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