

COLT CYLINDER SCENES, 1847–1851

By Arthur Tobias, Ed. D.

To the collector of Colt Percussion revolvers the three major Scenes engraved on their cylinders have always been items of keen interest. The presence and condition of the Rangers, Holdup and Naval Scenes on a Dragoon, Pocket '49 or '51 Navy are among the first factors considered when judging the quality of an antique Colt. Sam Colt and W. L. Ormsby would have had it no other way. They considered the Scenes central to the design and marketing of the revolvers and a sure way to defeat counterfeiters.

This volume explores the history, process, period applications and use of authorized and unauthorized modern copies of the Colt Cylinder Scenes. Through copious illustrations and thorough research, fictions are revealed and facts explored regarding the creation and use of the work of one of the 19th century's most famous banknote engravers, on the products of that era's most famous arms maker. Methods for detecting modern, fraudulent copies are painstakingly illustrated for each of the three Scenes.

W. L. Ormsby and His Process covers the biography, working methods and motivations of the man commissioned to create the Scenes. Pertinent facts about 19th century commercial engraving and Ormsby's working life are discussed. Myths and misstatements about the roller die engraving process are revealed in a well illustrated explanation of exactly how the images were rolled on Colt's cylinders.

Beginning with an extensive, on-the-ground search for the site of **The Texas Rangers and Comanches Fight** the second chapter lays the groundwork for the discussion of the first major Scene that Colt requested from Ormsby for the newly revived Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company. Every aspect from the original application to the Walker cylinders, to the truncated version on the first Baby Dragoons, is covered. The history of the actual event recorded in Ormsby's Scene, a watershed in 19th century mounted warfare, the actions surrounding its passage into engraved history, the variations in use and on period Brevetés and modern copies are discussed.

Surprising facts about **The Stagecoach Holdup Scene** are to be learned in chapter three. Drawing on research from many sources a complete picture of the circumstances surrounding the conception and purpose of the Scene on Colt's most popular percussion revolver are detailed. Variations in the period application, including into the cartridge era and on modern copies, are illustrated and discussed.

The **Naval Engagement Scene** is the topic of the last chapter. Little known historical facts connecting the events depicted in the Rangers and Naval Scenes are presented, with strong research support. The history of what was a groundbreaking moment in naval warfare is thoroughly presented, compiled from American, Texian and Mexican primary sources. The long life of the Naval Scene engraving itself, into the cartridge era, is discussed with copious illustrations. And one lingering, oft-discussed aspect of the Colt-Ormsby collaboration is given a new twist in an explanation culled from the history of 19th century American currency counterfeiting.

Many images, photos, drawings, maps and original 19th century illustrations illuminate **Colt Cylinder Scenes**, to clarify points made in the text for both the general reader and the most technically-minded gun collector. A number of items are brought together for the very first time to clearly define just what Sam Colt and W. L. Ormsby were up to in what was an exceedingly fruitful time for both of these men in the years 1847 to 1851.

Dr. Arthur Tobias has published over a dozen articles in various journals, on the topics of Colt percussion arms design and roller die engraving, detecting fraudulent engraving, Civil War history, and the use of arms in the 19th century. He is a lifelong artist with extensive experience in fine art design and engraving, a professor of education, an art historian and an aficionado of old Colts.

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