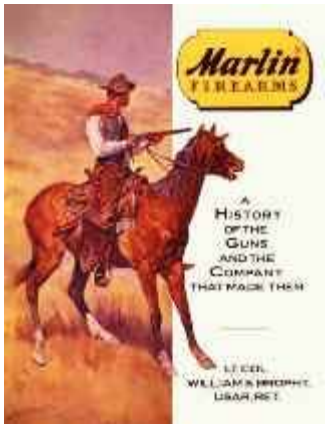
The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Story of Marlin and the Levergun

By: Glen E. Fryxell

Marlin Firearms, the very name conjures the image of a lean horseman, with a red bandana wrapped around his dusty neck and a work-worn felt hat jammed awkwardly onto his head, his chestnut mount braced at a sudden stop, and both of them are intently focused on something just out of the picture. The Marlin levergun is poised, almost at port-arms, ready to snap to the rider's bestubbled face and deal the unseen threat a leaden blow. It is a picture of a man, independent and free, taking care of himself. This image has captivated generations of American shooters, and undoubtedly has helped sell countless Marlin rifles over the years. After all, it is one of the central facets of how we Americans view ourselves -- independent, free, and capable.



The Marlin rifleman (this long-standing Marlin advertising image was used as the cover art on William Brophy's excellent history of Marlin Firearms)

Most American shooters know that Marlin has been around for quite a while, and that they have been making excellent leverguns for many years, but may not realize all the twists and turns in the trail that has made Marlin what it is today. It is a trail that has been rough and rocky in places, and at times, it didn't look like Marlin would survive, but survive it did, and today's shooters should count themselves as fortunate as Marlin came back strong to make some of the most popular leverguns of all time.

The story starts in 1836, when John Mahlon Marlin was born in Connecticut. He grew up in New England and entered the tool and die trade as a young man. During the Civil War, he started building guns, working at the Colt plant in Hartford. In 1870, he struck out on his own and founded Marlin Firearms Company in New Haven, Connecticut. He started off making single-shot brass framed derringers in .22 rimfire, and eventually added .32 and .38 caliber rimfire derringers to his product line. In 1875, Marlin added rifles to his product offerings, manufacturing the single-shot Ballard rifles (which had previously been made by others). A strategic business move was made in 1881, when Marlin introduced the Model 1881 lever-action repeating rifle. This was a well-built, accurate rifle, chambered for powerful hunting rounds like the .45-70 and .38-55. Now this was in the hey-day of the powerful Sharps single-shot rifles, but Marlin was making a big-bore high-powered rifle, and they were making it in a lever-actioned *repeater* (competing for the same market niche that Winchester had created with the Model 1876). The Marlin Model 1881 was well-received and firmly established Marlin in the levergun market.

A Marlin "trademark" was established a few years later when Marlin introduced the Model 1889, the first levergun to have a solid top and eject the empties out of the side of the receiver (the origin of the term "Marlin Safety"), instead of out the top (like Winchester leverguns). While 19th century levergunner's weren't interested in mounting telescopic sights on their rifles, they did appreciate the fact that these new guns didn't toss hot brass into their faces (or down their shirt collars). The 1889 was chambered for the popular pistol rounds of the day, like .44-40, .38-40, .32-20 and .25-20. This rifle would eventually lead to the Model 1894, a design that Marlin continues to manufacture today (and is a favorite of Cowboy action shooters).

Marlin had a stroke of genius in 1891 when they applied this solid top/side ejection to a smaller framed .22 rimfire levergun, that they named the Model 1891. This would be the beginnings of the beloved Marlin 39A, giving rise to what, more or less, amounts to the longest continuously manufactured rifle in the world (production was briefly suspended from 1917-1922 for the War effort). When it was re-introduced in 1922, this beautiful little rifle was renamed the Model 39. Almost 3 million have been made to date. The Marlin 39A has been called "the Cadillac of the .22s", and I couldn't agree more. I bought my first Marlin 39A (from McBride's, a fine gun shop in Austin, Texas) when I was a freshman in college. That rifle has logged many, many miles with me over the years, perforating thousands of pop-cans, and filling many a crock-pot with the fixin's for Brunswick stew. That rifle was given to my step-son when he turned 18, and he continues to cherish it as I have over the decades (yes, I did go out and buy myself a replacement!).

In 1893 Marlin applied the "solid-top, side-ejection" concept to full-length rifle cartridges with the Model 1893. Over the years, this rifle would be chambered in .25-36, .30-30, .32 Special, .32-40, and .38-55. This rifle was later re-named the Model 1936 (care to guess when? later this designation was shortened simply to the Model 36). The 1893/1936/36 had the same side ejection that its predecessors had, with the flat-sided bolt and an open, square-cut bolt raceway milled through the rear of the receiver for the bolt to move through. The Model 36 was manufactured up through 1948.

The Marlin 39A, the "Cadillac of the .22's"

The Marlin Model 36 (both of these are .30-30s)

The .30-30 Winchester occupies a special place in my heart as it constitutes an almost perfect cast bullet cartridge. My personal favorite .30-30s are a pair of Marlin 36s, both dating from the late 1940s. These rifles have had many rounds down their bores over the years, and during the years that I've owned them, not a one of them has worn a

jacket. My favorite "knock-about" load for these guns is the Lyman #311041 170 grain GC-FP over 25.0 grains of H335 (inspired by Jim Taylor's pet load using the RCBS 180 grain GC-FP), which produces about 1950 fps and fine accuracy. When the hollow-point version of the Lyman 311041 is substituted into this load one gets a load that produces violent expansion and significant amounts of bloodshot meat (i.e. an explosive varmint load, but more destructive than some meat hunters care for). Excellent expansion and minimal bloodshot meat can be obtained with cast hollow-points at around 1600 fps (18.0 grains of 4198 is a good recipe for this velocity in the .30-30).

As long as we're on the topic of 1890s vintage leverguns, a little-known fact is that Marlin made the first 8,000 or so Savage 1895s (the predecessor to the Savage 99). It seems that Mr. Savage had the rifle design, but did not have the manufacturing capabilities, so he contracted this work out to Marlin. These rifles can be identified by the "JM" that they have stamped on the bottom side of the barrel.

After the turn of the century the Marlin Company went through a tumultuous series of ownership changes. In 1901, John Marlin died and his two sons inherited the business as a part of his estate. In 1910, John Barlow retired from his post leading the Ideal Reloading Tool Company, and Marlin bought Ideal, makers of the respected Ideal bullet moulds (Marlin also took over publication of the Ideal Handbooks, which they had been contributing to previously). In 1915 the winds of war were swirling and it became apparent that the United States might get involved in the war festering in Europe. A group of investors (William Bonbright & Co. and Kissell-Kinnicut & Co., both associated with J. P. Morgan) bought the Marlin Company (at about the same time Marlin sold off the Ideal Reloading Tool Company to Phineas Talcott, who later sold it to Lyman). A. F. Rockwell became president of the new Marlin Arms Corporation, and in 1916 re-named it the Marlin Rockwell Corporation, which went on to become one of the largest machine gun manufacturers in the world. In 1919, the owner/investors were lead by John. F. Moran. As World War I ended, business faltered, and Marlin began to divest itself of the various other businesses that it had acquired during the war years (including the manufacture of ball bearings, roller bearings, radiators, automobiles, wire, bombs and high explosive projectiles). With a vastly simplified product line focused specifically on sporting firearms, the Marlin Firearms Corporation was formed in 1921. But business was not good, and in 1922 the company filed for bankruptcy and went into foreclosure. In 1924, the company was put on the auction block. According to the history posted on the Marlin website (http://www.marlinfirearms.com), this auction was attended by "several curious children, a small dog and a lawyer named Frank Kenna". Mr. Kenna bid $100 on the Marlin properties, and won the auction. He also got the $100,000 debt that went along with them. Kenna got the business back on stable footing and re-introduced several of the popular guns from before the War. The Marlin Firearms Company has been in the Kenna family ever since.

In 1949 the Model 36 was slightly redesigned, and re-introduced as the now familiar Model 336, which Marlin still makes today. The 336 had a bolt made out

of round-stock, and an improved extractor stamped out of spring steel. The receiver was milled with a window on the side for ejection and a round window in the rear for bolt travel (instead of one big slot cut all the way through), leaving the rear sidewall of the receiver intact, resulting in a somewhat more solid, and stronger, receiver block. A year later they added the .35 Remington (a rimless round that Remington had first introduced in their Model 8 semi-auto) to create one of the finest hunting rifles ever made. There have been over 6 million rifles made in the 336 "family" of leverguns.

I have long been a fan of the .35 Remington. I have been shooting, handloading for, and hunting with the .35 Remington now for over15 years, and have used it to kill mule deer and feral hogs. I have grown quite fond of the Marlin 336 in .35 Remington and can testify as to how well this combination shoots cast bullets. A while back I had the opportunity to go hog hunting with some friends, and I got the chance to use a special Marlin 336 in .35 Remington to shoot a pig with (this rifle was a gift from a good friend, who knows how much I like both the .35 Remington and the Marlin 336). The RCBS 200 grain GC-FP at 2100 fps (38.0 grains of H335) flattened a nice little 150 lb meat hog with authority. I like the way the .35 Remington does its job -- you shoot a critter with it, and that critter tends to go down, quickly.

The Marlin Model 336 (l-r: the 336 Carbine (336-RC), the 336 Sporting Rifle (336-A), and the 336 "Texan" (straight grip version of the 336-RC); all three in .35 Remington).

In the post-war growth of the "Baby Boom" Marlin began to experiment with a number of new ideas. Up to this point, all Marlin rifles had been made with so-called "Ballard rifling". This was typically 6-groove rifling that was cut one groove at a time, with each groove being cut by multiple passes of the cutting head, generally to a depth of about .004". This is the time-tested method for making a rifled bore, but it is time-consuming and tedious. In the early 1950s Marlin started experimenting with a new form of rifling that was cut with a single pass of a multiple grooved tool head (which presumably speeded up production significantly). Each groove was smaller and shallower than "normal" in this process. Since each land would provide less overall "traction" on the bullet, Marlin put in a lot more grooves and lands (commonly 16 or more). Thus was born Micro-Groove rifling. After Micro-Groove rifling had proven itself in Marlin's line of .22 rimfire rifles, it was added to the centerfire line in the mid-1950s. Claims were made that Micro-Groove rifling produced better accuracy because it distorted the bullet less, but I have never been able to tell any significant difference in the accuracy between Ballard rifling and Micro-Groove rifling in my own group shooting.

Please allow me a brief caveat -- Micro-Groove rifling somehow gained an

undeserved reputation for not being able to shoot cast bullets very well. This just flat isn't true; some of my best cast bullet groups have been shot with Micro-Groove barrels. For best accuracy in Micro-Groove barrels, cast bullets need to be over-sized, moderately hard (BHN of 12 or more), and gas-checked. If one does these three things, then a Micro-Groove levergun will shoot cast bullets just fine. Now it IS true that a well worn Micro-Groove barrel may have trouble with cast bullets, but that's true of any worn (or pitted) barrel. It's not due to the form of the rifling, but rather the condition of the bore. In good condition, Micro-Groove rifling will shoot cast bullets as well as a cut rifled barrel in similar condition.

Micro-Groove rifling was the standard of the Marlin line from the mid-1950s up through the mid-1990s. Along about 1997 or so, Micro-Groove rifling was dropped from the big-bore 336s and 1894s, and Marlin returned to 6-groove "Ballard" rifling for these guns. The .22 rimfire guns and .30-30 336s are still made with Micro-Groove rifling.

In the mid 1950s, Marlin began experimenting with modernizing levergun design. In 1956, they introduced the Model 56, the first of an entirely new class of Marlin leverguns.

These rifles had a very short 2" lever-throw, allowing for very speedy reloading, and were named the Marlin "Levermatic". The Model 56 was chambered for the .22 Long Rifle, and was fed with a box-magazine.

Shortly thereafter, a tubular magazine version was introduced (named the Model 57), along with the Model 57 Magnum, chambered in the .22 Magnum round. Winchester was making news with its sleek, new Model 88, chambered in hunting rounds like the .308 Winchester, and in 1962 Marlin entered the centerfire market with a version of it Levermatic, tailored for short centerfire rounds. Thus was born the centerfire Model 62, chambered in .357 Magnum, .256 Winchester Magnum, and .22 Remington Jet (and later on in .30 Carbine). The Marlin Levermatic's were not popular sellers and were dropped from production by 1973.

An example of the Marlin Levermatic; this one is a Model 62 chambered in .30 Carbine.

Starting somewhere around 1960, Marlin also made a number of "store brand" rifles for a variety of outlets (Sears, J. C. Higgins, Wards, etc.). Most notable in this regard was the Glenfield line of guns that were produced by Marlin up through about 1982. The Glenfield Model 30 was basically a Marlin 336 with a cheaper birch stock, and stamped checkering. The Glenfield line was made for high volume mass-marketers (e.g. Wal-Mart, K-Mart), who were looking for an affordable rifle that still provided good value. The Glenfield rifles do not have the Marlin signature bullseye, or white line spacers, but they shoot and handle just like Marlins.

Marlin's next new idea was the introduction of the .444 Marlin in 1964. The Model 444 was built on the 336 action, and when loaded with factory ammo would

launch a 240 grain bullet at over 2300 fps (later a 265 grain load at 2200 fps would be added). When hand loaded, the .444 Marlin could easily reach 2100 fps with 300 grains bullets, in some ways reminiscent of the grand old .405 Winchester (which shot a 300 grain bullet at 2200 fps). What's more, having shot both rifles, I can testify that the .444 Marlin delivers this level of ballistics from a stock design that is far more comfortable to shoot than the .405 Winchester (that crescent steel butt-plate of the Winchester Model 1895 can be hard on the shoulder with a cartridge that develops this level of recoil). I have often wondered why the ammunition makers don't offer a 300 grain load for the .444 Marlin -- it makes a fine combination. I suspect that Teddy Roosevelt would have rather liked it. Shooters tend to have a nostalgic streak, and Marlin has learned to cater to this tendency. In any event, the .444 Marlin has gained a following and has been a mainstay in the Marlin line ever since 1964.

The Marlin Model 444-S (.444 Marlin)

Working up loads for new guns is one of my favorite past times. I have played with a lot of different rounds over the years, but one of my favorite ones is the .444 Marlin. In fact, I like it so much that I recently had Mountain Molds make a mould for me, designed specifically for the .444 Marlin levergun -- a 300 grain ogival round-nose flat-point with a GC, and a 73% meplat. My favorite load for this bullet is 49.0 grains of H322 for 2100 fps, which delivers excellent accuracy. If you find me in the woods during elk season in the Pacific Northwest, don't be surprised if I'm carrying this load. I really like it.

The next new idea that Marlin came out with was a mixture of old and new. With the surging popularity of the .44 Magnum handguns in the 1960s, Marlin re-introduced the short-action Model 1894 in 1969, chambered for this modern high-pressure round. This combination created a light, hard-hitting carbine, ideal for still-hunting in brushy country, where the fast-handling characteristics of the 1894 were a real bonus. The .357 Magnum chambering was added in the 1970s, and later (around 1990) a short run of .41 Magnum 1894s was also made. With the growing popularity of both the 1894 and cowboy action shooting, other cartridges were added to the line, later in the 1990s (.32-20, .25-20, .45 Colt, .44-40, even the .218 Bee!). Over a million 1894s have been produced.

The Marlin 1894 chambered in .44 Magnum, .41 Magnum or .45 Colt makes an excellent hunter. The 1 in 38" twist used in the .44 Magnum limits this rifle to bullets no heavier than the 320 grain SSK FP, but the .45 Colt has a 1 in 16" twist and can easily handle a wide variety of bullet weights. The .357 Magnum version is one of my favorite plinking rifles when stoked with .38 special ammo, and makes a spectacular varmint rifle for game like jack rabbits and ground squirrels when loaded with ammo designed for rapid expansion. My favorite load for these pursuits is Ray Thompson's cast hollow-point (the Lyman 358156 HP) over 14.0

grains of 2400, for over 1700 fps. The short-nosed SWC profile feeds just fine in the Marlin, and the cast HP really delivers the goods when it gets where it's going.

The Marlin Model 1894 (l-r: 1895-C in .357 Magnum, 1894-S in .41 Magnum, 1894 in .44 Magnum and 1894 in .45 Colt).

The Marlin .357 Magnum also makes a first-rate home-defense gun when loaded with suitable ammo.

The next "new idea" that Marlin experimented with was another classic combination of old and new, and one that has resonated strongly with American hunters for the last 30+ years. In 1972-1973 Marlin introduced a new rifle based on their 336 action, chambered for the .45-70 Government cartridge. This rifle was named the Model 1895 (not to be confused with the old Model 1895, which was a unique variant of the 1893 action, and was also chambered for large, powerful hunting cartridges). This new .45-70 levergun was an immediate hit with hunters who pursued big game in heavy woods. Attention must be paid to overall cartridge length in these rifles, and loads must be heavily crimped, for ammunition to function properly. However, with suitable bullets properly loaded, this gun delivers impressive performance (e.g. 400 grain bullets at 1700-1800 fps).

My first experience with the Model 1895 was indeed memorable. The rifle had just recently been introduced and Dale Harber (a family friend who would take me shooting every so often) had gotten his hands on one. I was in junior high at the time, had the physique of a tomato stake, and couldn't have weighed more than about 105 lbs, soaking wet. One Saturday morning, Dale came by and picked me up and we went out to the rifle range out at the Annex outside of town. This was a very fun morning and we shot all kinds of different guns. We finished the morning up with the Marlin .45-70 and some handloads that Dale had assembled, with (as I recall) 350 grain bullets at 1900 fps. Dale took the first few shots, to make sure the gun was properly sighted in. I recall watching him shoot that rifle, and the effect that its recoil had on him. I wasn't intimidated per se, but I'll admit I was a little apprehensive. He showed me how to tuck the butt of the rifle into the "pocket" of my shoulder, told me to grip the rifle firmly, and to squeeze the trigger. I established my best offhand position, and did all the things that Dale had told me to do. Well, sort of. Somewhere between the start of the trigger squeeze, and the final panicked yank of the trigger, I'm pretty sure my eyes closed involuntarily. I seem to recall that the sights were more or less on the target as my eyes closed, and that when they opened I was looking at the underside of the tin roof over the firing line, with the muzzle of the rifle almost vertical. I straightened back up and looked around behind me to find Dale standing there, ready to catch the rifle in case I had let go. He had a big grin on his face (I guess I did too). "That wasn't so bad, was it?", he asked. "Uhhh, no, I

guess not. Did I hit the target?". We carefully scanned the target through the spotting scope and there was no evidence of my shot. "Would you like to try again?" Dale asked. "Yeah, I would." Same basic procedure, except this time my eyes were only half-closed when the Hammer of Thor roared. Dale was watching the impact area and reported that my shot fell just off the paper at 3 o'clock. Eager to prove that I could indeed hit the target, I asked for another round, which Dale gave me. This time I was focused on the target, got a little sloppy and wasn't holding the rifle as tightly as I should have been, and it smacked my bony teenaged shoulder smartly, leaving a purple bruise. My shot still fell just off the paper to the right, but I was done shooting for the day. I have since learned how to shoot rifles with this level of recoil and have grown quite fond of the big-bore Marlin leverguns, but I'll remember that first day with the .45-70 for a long time.

Along about 1983, in the interest of safety, Marlin added a cross-bolt safety to its leverguns. This elicited a large collective groan from much of the shooting community, but it's easily ignored if one doesn't care for it.

Aside from the solid top, side ejection, round bolt and spring steel extractor, there are a couple of other distinctive style features that make a Marlin 336 and 39A levergun easy to identify. First off there is the signature Marlin "bullseye" on the underside of the butt stock. Contrary to what some misinformed "know-it-alls" will tell you, this is NOT where one is supposed to screw in the sling swivel! Don't do it! This is just a small plastic plug that is put in place for decoration purposes only. Screwing a sling swivel into this little piece of plastic will ruin it, and even if the screw does manage to stay in place for a little while, a sling so mounted will not support the weight of the rifle. The sling swivel screw needs to have its threads well entrenched in hardwood, not soft plastic. The other distinctive style feature of the Marlin 336 and 39A family of leverguns is the white line spacers in the butt plate and the pistol grip cap. Some shooters find this flourish attractive, some don't care for it at all. But the bottom line is that these two features allow one to pick out the Marlin leverguns from a jumbled up pile of rifles on a gun show table, even without being able to see anything forward of the pistol grip.

In each of our lives there come special moments where inspirational figures move us to better ourselves. One such moment happened to me in a caliche creek bed in central Texas, when I was about 12 years old. Once again, I was plinking with Dale Harber, a family friend who would take me shooting every so often. We were shooting his Marlin 39A, and the targets *du jour* were pecans, placed on the far embankment of the creek, about 30 yards off. I had just run back from placing a fresh batch of targets up on the bank (there was a pecan tree nearby). Dale topped off the magazine, and handed me the Marlin. "Let me see you hit that one." he said pointing. I took the rifle and started to drop into my favored open-legged sitting position, "Offhand." he said sternly. Dale was an officer in the Army, and knew how to give an order. I remember thinking to myself, "Why bother?

Why even waste the ammo? It would be impossible to hit that pecan from here offhand!", but the challenge had been issued, and I was not going to let it go unanswered (besides, it was Dale's ammo). I levered a round home, and settled

into my best offhand form. I watched the crosshairs as they danced around that pecan. I certainly wished that they would sit still! The hammer dropped and the

A couple of Marlin "signatures"; the Marlin "bullseye" and white line spacers.

shot fell wide by a couple of inches. Again and again I tried, each time with the same result. After 5 or 6 shots, the chosen pecan stood untouched in a wash of impact craters. Dale was working hard not to smirk. My budding young *machismo* was bruised, and I sensed his amusement, "OK, let's see YOU do it!". He took the Marlin, and never said a word. He set his feet, carefully levered a round home, and settled into his best offhand stance. He let his breath out with the discipline of a trained rifleman and started a slow, deliberate trigger squeeze. At the crack of the Marlin, that pecan simply ceased to exist. He didn't just nick it and knock it a few feet of to one side, he center-punched it, shattering it, and scattering the fragments upon the four winds. I vowed to myself, there and then, that someday I would be able to shoot like that. It's good to have strong role models. By the way, don't try to tell me that Micro-Groove barrels can't shoot lead bullets accurately!

Marlin has been around for 136 years (as of this writing) and they have made some of the most popular leverguns ever. Not a bad legacy for a young man from New England, setting out on his own to make a living, right after the Civil War. 26 million guns later, they continue to build on this legacy every day. For those that would like to learn more about Marlin and its history, I recommend the book "Marlin Firearms: A History of the Guns and the Company That Made Them", written by William S. Brophy and published by Stackpole Books (1989). The Marlin Collectors Association (marlin-collectors.com) is also a valuable source of information.

- Glen E. Fryxell

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