SIDELOCKS, BOXLOCKS & DROPLOCKS

– Larry's Short Stories #152 –

These two early L. C. Smith shotguns, made in the 1880's, are good examples of the hammer-type and hammerless sidelocks. Note that the hammer and the firing pin are inside the action on the lower gun, and there is a sliding safety on the tang.

One of the characteristics of my personality is that I want to know how things work. Well, not everything — how a washing machine or a dishwasher works is of little interest. But guns, well they're my passion. I want to know how the trigger works, the automatic ejectors work – and on and on.

It's amazing to study the design of break-open shotguns from their beginnings about 1860 until the design was pretty much complete in 1910 or so; hard to imagine that it took 50 years to develop the break-open shotgun.

A gun is made up from a lock, a stock, and a barrel. Certainly the lock is one of the most important and interesting parts; after all, it fires the gun. As muzzleloaders began giving way to break-open cartridge guns in the 1860's, the hammers stayed on the outside of the locks and made contact with the firing pins – also on the outside of the frame. The development of that era was focused on the hinging, locking and opening of the barrels.

This is a classic Parker VHE. Parker's hammer guns were all sidelocks, but their hammerless guns were only offered in boxlock design, like this one.

In 1875, the English firm of Anson and Deeley developed the 'Boxlock' design, in which the hammers, sears and firing pins were concealed inside the frame (box). At about the same time, gun companies began putting the hammers on the inside of the locks and the firing pins on the inside of the frame – we call these sidelocks, to differentiate them from boxlocks. The hammers were cocked automatically when the action was opened, and now safeties were required to help prevent accidental discharges.

Boxlock guns are a bit less expensive to build and were thought to be somewhat inferior to the sidelocks, so 'best guns' have always been of the sidelock design; though not all sidelocks are 'best guns'. L.C. Smith chose to move the hammers inside (in 1886), and continued to make sidelock guns – with hammers on the outside or inside – Customers' choice. Parker began offering a hammerless boxlock action in 1888 – while still offering outside hammer sidelock guns.

> "...the lock is one of the most interesting parts..."

Competition between the English gun companies was always very keen, so Westley Richards introduced the detachable Droplocks in 1897 – perhaps just to be different. The droplock is simply a stand-a-lone hammer and sear, that drops in and out of the bottom of the boxlock action – for cleaning or repair. Sidelocks, Boxlocks and Droplocks; a bit of firearms trivia that only a serious gun guy like me would give much thought to.

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This Westley Richards 'Ovundu' model features droplocks. The right lock has been 'dropped out' and you can see the hammer, sear and mainspring. The left lock is only partially removed. The only parts left inside the action are the firing pins and the trigger.

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