



CELEBRATING THE FORGOTTEN MAN

HENRY PEABODY'S TIMELESS RIFLE

WALNUT HILL

by Terry Wieland

Compile a list of the great American rifle designers of the 1800s, and the name Henry O. Peabody is unlikely to be found alongside Winchester, Remington and Sharps, or even, for that matter, with Ballard, Savage and Marlin.

Except for some limited circles, Henry Peabody is the forgotten man of riflemaking, even though his basic design became one of the most successful military and target rifles in history – a rifle that was first manufactured in 1862 in Boston, was still in production as recently as the 1970s and outlived every one of its more famous contemporaries.

Peabody's obscurity is the result of the 1880's habit of attaching multiple names to designs as they were modified. Not to drag out the suspense, Peabody's great creation is known to most of us today

The BSA Martini Model 15 .22 target rifle, circa 1932. Not the prettiest, perhaps, but it shoots extremely well.



as the Martini-Henry – the famous British military rifle that was used to defeat the Zulus.

Peabody's original design had an external hammer and was one of the very first rifles made for a self-contained cartridge. In this case, the .50 rimfire. Introduced as it was in the midst of the Civil War, the Peabody faced an uphill battle for recognition and acceptance.

The Peabody-Martini's finest hour: A Westley Richards .300 Sherwood rook rifle.

Although it was adopted by the Connecticut militia and some were also shipped to the government of Canada, the Peabody's career as a military rifle took place mostly on foreign shores.

The largest single conflict in which the Peabody was used was the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) in 1878. To give some idea of the scale involved, the Peabody rifle was then being manufactured by the Providence Tool Co. After extensive testing, the Turks ordered 600,000 rifles; the company had the capacity to produce 1,000 rifles a day, so this was a significant order for a major industrial concern.

So how did the Peabody rifle become known as the Martini-Henry? Most accounts give Friedrich von Martini, a Swiss, the credit for modifying the design from hammer to hammerless, but in fact,

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For Peabody, the resulting headlines and public outrage were disastrous. Still, the Peabody rifle was such an excellent design that it made its mark as a target rifle in the great days of Creedmoor, What Cheer and Walnut Hill. Peabody introduced a line of cartridges, and the rifles were of exceedingly high quality, very accurate and strong to a fault.

James J. Grant, who wrote a trio of books on single-shot target rifles, first published in 1947, described the Peabody as "practically unknown even among otherwise well-informed gun-minded men." Grant, the foremost modern authority on single-shot rifles, not only had a high opinion of the Peabody, but he was also fascinated by oddities – and the Peabody rifles certainly qualified.

"Peabody-Martini rifles have been one of my favorites for a long time," he wrote. "With their odd rifling, odd actions, odder sights, and, oddest of all, their calibers, they have been almost odd enough to suit anyone!"

If American Peabody rifles are rare, such is not the case elsewhere in the world. In Switzerland, home to Friedrich von Martini, the action (with subsequent modifications) became the basis for some extremely fine *schuetzen* rifles. Later, Hammerli used a miniature Martini action as the basis for its "free" (unrestricted) target pistol, a gun that still causes drooling and heart palpitations among lovers of fine mechanisms. It was in England, however, that the Peabody found greatest acceptance – not surprising, given that the Martini-Henry was the British military rifle for more than a decade.

British gunmakers used the massive action as the basis for shotguns, big game rifles, long-range target rifles and even created a scaled-down action upon which to build first rook rifles and later, when the .22 rimfire had largely displaced the miniature rook rifles, several lines of small game and target .22s.

The Martini action became the darling of the Birmingham gunmakers, first W.W. Greener and then Westley Richards. In Grant's opinion, it was with the Greener rook rifles that the Martini "... reached its highest development in England." It was, he said, "a strictly fine sporting arm." The best of all, though, Grant said, were the German and Swiss *Schuetzen* rifles – the "very highest development" of the Martini action.

For those whose only experience with Peabody's rifle or its variants is the heavy, cumbersome and decidedly awkward military Martini-Henry, a well-made custom rifle on a Martini action is a revelation.

To start with, rifles based on the British miniature Martini are much more graceful. The reduced size allows the trigger finger to be in the right place with the hand firmly on the pistol grip. The odd sway-backed look of the action is minimized, and when fitted with a traditional single-shot stock similar to an Alexander Henry or

Ruger No.1, they are downright attractive – more so, in my opinion, than any of the other American single shots except the Winchester High Wall or the Farrow.

A few years ago, I came across a photograph of a custom Martini .22 built by gunmaker Dominick Pisano in San Antonio, Texas. It had a long, octagonal barrel, iron sights, beautiful lines and was set up as a .22 offhand target rifle. Admittedly, this is not the largest market a gunmaker might reach for, but for those who would like to have a Schuetzen-style .22, I cannot think of a better way to start. And, the small BSA-Martini actions are readily available.

For those who would like the fun without the custom gunmaker's bill, one can still find original BSA target rifles with Olympic-style sights, proper target stocks, provision for slings and all the other features of a competition rifle, and generally for less than \$1,000.

I bought such a rifle a few years ago with the idea of using the

barreled action as the basis for a custom rifle, and after a few sessions on the range the (decidedly homely) rifle had proven to be so accurate and so much fun to shoot, I left it exactly as it was and started combing the Internet for original parts and accoutrements.

Interesting to think that the rifle is a direct descendant of an idea that first saw the light in Boston, Massachusetts, before the Battle of Gettysburg and traveled around the world to come back here in this form. It really should have Peabody's name on it somewhere. **72**

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