



by **Richard MacLean**

Model 1927 - Rarest of the Colt Thompsons **A story about Colt Thompson Nos. 4943 & 5238**

Rare is a relative term and it does not always translate directly into either the most desirable or valuable gun in a collection. Unique prototypes, serial numbers or other distinctive production characteristics are important to collectors as is condition. Some guns have visual appeal, history and quality - a mystique - about them. Considering all these factors, it is no wonder that Model 1921 Colt Thompsons are both desirable and very valuable.

But even a “standard” 1921 Thompson can become not just valuable but priceless, if it has some connection to famous people and events. An excellent example of this was presented by Frank Iannamico in “*Dillinger’s Thompson*” (*Small Arms Review*, Vol. 6, No. 10, July 2003) and by David Albert in “*St. Valentine’s Day Forensics*” (*Small Arms Review* Vol. 12, No. 6, March 2009).

In this article, we examine the development history and functioning of a rare variant of the 1921 Colt Thompson: the semiautomatic Model of 1927 marketed by Auto-Ordnance as the “Anti-Bandit Gun.” They both have all of the previously-mentioned desirable characteristics, plus a few unusual twists, namely, their connection to a martial artist in the Black Belt Hall of Fame, the actor Steve McQueen and the movie *Bowling for Columbine*.

The Emergence of the “Anti-Bandit Gun”

By 1927, the reputation of the Colt 1921 submachine gun had already earned a status among both criminals and law enforcement as a formidable weapon. Management at Auto-Ordnance believed that there was a niche market for a semiautomatic version for police and prison departments that wanted the intimidation factor of a Thompson, but without the risk of full-auto fire. Spraying and praying in the hands of officers possibly poorly trained in the use of full-auto fire is never a good idea.



Lead photo, above: Colt Thompson Nos. 4943 (top) and 5238 (bottom)

Right: Sam Allred (left) and Steve McQueen (right) at the Albuquerque, NM shoot in 1978. (Photo courtesy Sam Allred)



Above: The actuator slot on Number 4943 is round and on Number 5238 it is square; indicating early and later receiver designs, respectively.

Auto-Ordnance took the receivers of existing 1921 Models and milled out the markings on the receiver “THOMPSON SUBMACHINE GUN” and re-stamped “THOMPSON SEMI-AUTOMATIC CARBINE.” Similar treatment was given to the original stamping “MODEL OF 1921.” The arrow and “FULL-AUTO” markings were milled out and left blank. All of these areas were blackened, but not re-blued. Not surprisingly, with routine cleaning, these areas would brighten to bare metal. No alterations were made that would have prevented full-auto parts from being directly re-installed.

Modifications to the fire control group are shown on page 49 with the original full-auto components side-by-side for comparison. The position of the rocker is controlled by a cam on the selector. When the full-auto rocker is in the lower position the bolt travels back and forth freely without hitting the rocker. On a 1927 semiautomatic carbine, there is no cam on the selector. The rocker is both larger and contains a spring and pin. This prevents the rocker from being lowered to affect fully automatic fire. There is a slot milled into the trigger frame to accommodate this larger rocker and both the sear and sear lever have metal milled off one edge. Two different 1927 rockers have been observed: the finely machined Colt version and a later type re-worked from a standard 1921 rocker.

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nounced the availability of the new “Anti-Bandit Gun” offered in three special grades and two standard grades. Variations included a vertical or horizontal foregrip, a 50-round drum or a 20-round box magazine, adjustable sling and Cutts Compensator. Prices ranged from a low of \$135 dealer/\$175 retail to \$177 dealer/\$227 retail. The semiautomatic carbine came supplied with its own manual unique to the Model 1927.

In inflation-adjusted money that is about \$2,700 for the top-end model. In their day, these guns were relatively expensive, especially considering that other semiautomatic guns could be had at a fraction of the cost.

Sales Stall

Sales were slow and few were kept in stock. In a letter responding to a request by J. Curtis Earl in 1972, the Director of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division reported that, “Research conducted by members of our technical staff has disclosed that the Model of 1927 Semi-Automation Carbine was manufactured in very limited numbers. The Auto-Ordnance records disclosed a total of only 42 Model 1927 Semi-Automatic carbines in stock in 1934.”

Most were sold to prisons instead of law enforcement and were made on demand. Several Model 1921 Thompsons have receivers with the milled slot, but were never fully converted (i.e., the receiver markings modified). It is believed that fewer than 150 were ever made. Gordon Herigstad’s authoritative accounting of all known Thompsons lists 89 Model 1927s of a total of approximately 15,000 original Colts. Contrast this with the approximately one million full-auto Thompsons made by two manufacturers and in all variations during World War II. Indeed, the Model 1927 is rare.

Although initial sales of the semiautomatic Colts went to law departments with management squeamish about full-auto weapons, succeeding leadership must have thought the concern groundless. Most converted the guns back to full auto by simply installing the fully automatic fire components, usually from the cheaper and more common 1928A1 parts and not original 1921 Colt parts. Some departments crudely stamped the milled-out section on the receiver “AUTO.”



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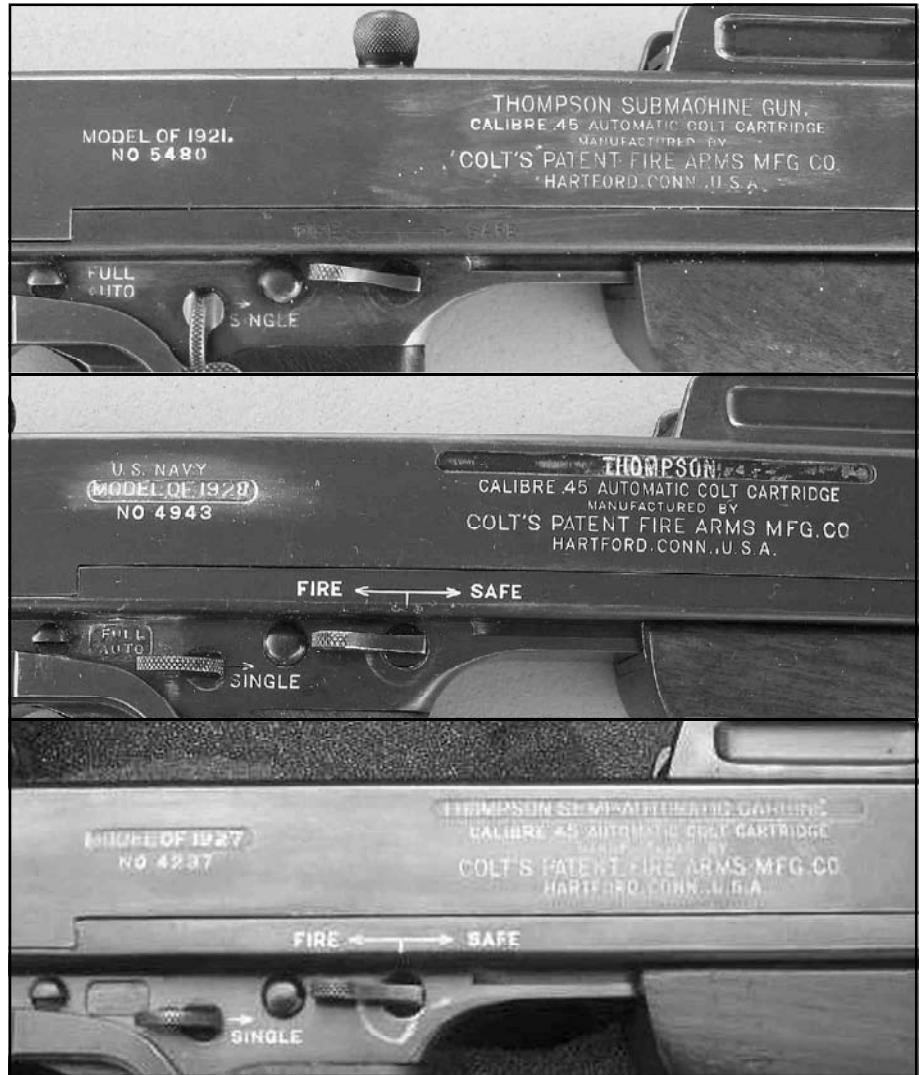
The guns that subsequently wound up in collectors' hands were classified as machine guns. Undeniably, both because of their short barrel and their original 1921 receiver (once a machine gun - always a machine gun), they never were semiautomatic in the eyes of the ATF.

Serial Numbers 4943 and 5238

These Two Model 1927s started life as all the other 1927s, namely, as Colt 1921 receivers. They were sold to the New Mexico State Penitentiary in 1928. Prior to 1935, they were sent back to the factory, converted by Auto-Ordnance to Model 1928 Navy full-auto submachine guns and then returned to New Mexico. These are the only known factory conversions so marked with the 7 over-stamped with an 8 and "U.S. NAVY" added.

On May 23, 1935, the Superintendent of the State Prison in Santa Fe registered both on a single Form 1 (Firearms) with the Treasury Department under the requirements of the 1934 National Firearms Act. They are equipped with original 50-round patent drums and, as with the majority of Model 1927s, these examples have Cutts Compensators. The trigger frame and receiver serial numbers match. The actuator slot on Number 4943 is round and on Number 5238 it's square, indicating early and later receiver designs, respectively. Again, Auto-Ordnance used the receivers it had on hand and it represents the only significant difference between the two.

Curt La Manna, Class 2 manufacturer and firearms appraiser, describes them as follows, "They are all original with the condition of the wood consistent with the exterior of the guns. Butt plates on both guns were re-blued at some point in their history. Their condition of Number 4943 and Number 5238 is 90% and 93%, re-



Top: 1921 Colt Thompson. **Center:** 1927 Colt Thompson factory converted to 1928 Navy. **Bottom:** Unaltered 1927 Colt Thompson. (Photo courtesy George Rich)

spectively. They have original 21/28 heavy actuators with duel rivets and high nickel steel bolts and lower internals."

Researching their history

There is not a collector of military or historic weapons alive who has not held

one of their favorite guns and wondered what amazing tales it could tell. Guns that helped tame the West, win World War II, made the 20's roar or thrilled movie fans... if only they could speak. Guns can bark, as it were, but they can't ever speak. Nevertheless, sometimes there can be a paper trail and an oral history that accompanies

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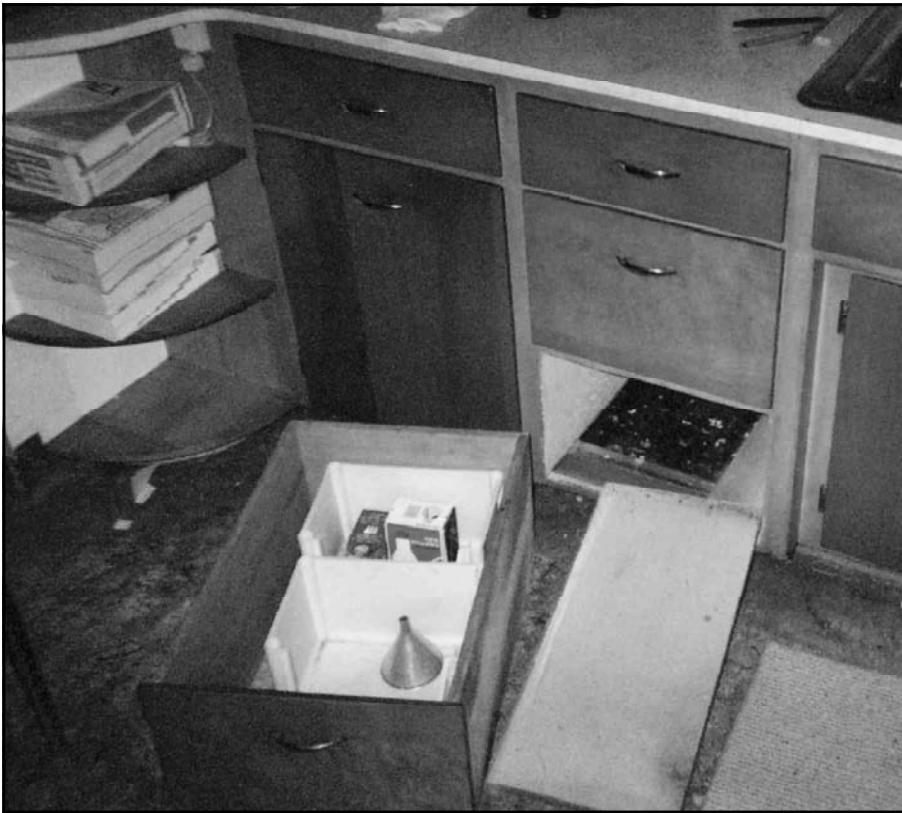
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Left: Entrance to the secret compartment in the kitchen leading to the discovery of the two missing 1927 Colt Thompsons.

many of these ordinary guns that have been through extraordinary events.

Collectors immediately become wary of classic story lines in the absence of any documentation. An emblematic case: Grandpa's war trophy Luger found on the side of the road becomes two generations later, "My Grandfather took this off a dead Waffen-SS officer." A wary buyer might pay a fair price based primarily on condition, but that same buyer may do his research and find that it is a rare Mauser 1939 Banner Police Luger - hitting the jackpot in rare Lugers.

Part of the fun in collecting is uncovering these fascinating surprises. But even paper trails can be inaccurate and, as mentioned, stories can become embellished with time. Caveat emptor - Let the buyer (or collector) beware.

The Hunt for the Guns

Charles and Alice Olsen of Phoenix, Arizona, were designated to inherit both of the aforementioned guns from a close friend, Thomas Maloney of White Bear

Lake, Minnesota. Tom told them that they were originally owned by a brother-in-law of the late actor Steve McQueen. McQueen considered these guns his to shoot, but could not directly own them because, the story went, "McQueen was a convicted felon."

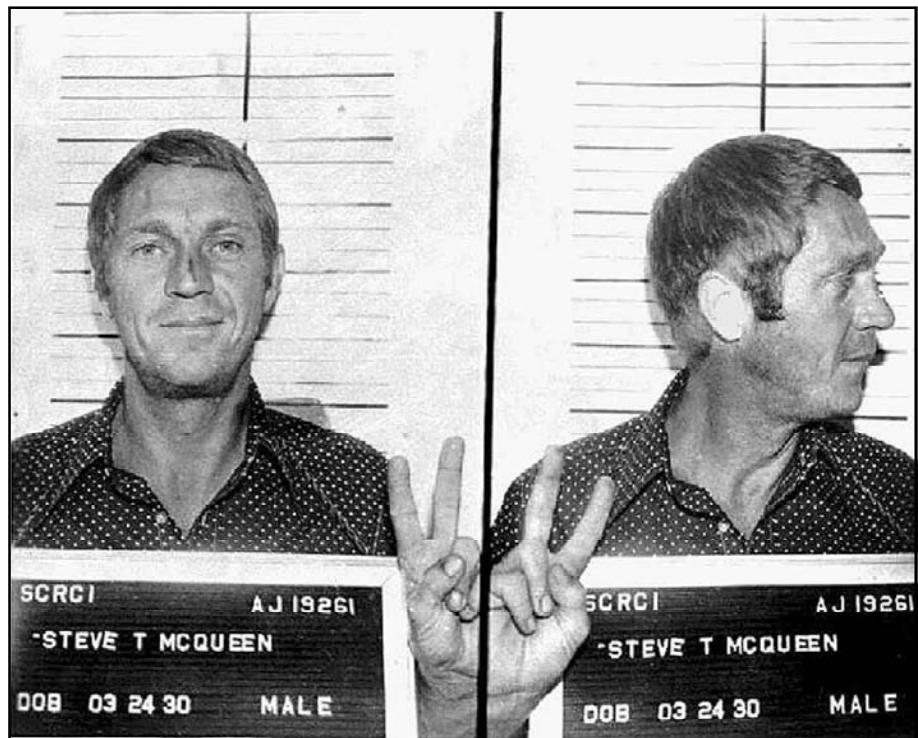
Tom died very suddenly in 2006 and left no indication of where his guns were stored. The Olsens had a copy of their

original registration in 1935, copies of the Form 4s and the sales receipt from the previous owner, Terry Williams, who sold them to Maloney in 1985. Included on the receipt was also a notation that a film of Steve McQueen shooting these guns was included in the sale. They had all this paperwork, but no guns or film.

Tom had a vast collection of Class III weapons and the initial inventory indicated that five were missing, including these two rare submachine guns. Charles lamented, "I looked everywhere, spending months trying to track these guns down. We even went so far as contacting local storage companies and banks trying to determine if Tom had a locker or vault no one knew about. I tracked down nearly one hundred of his business associates, friends and relatives. One told me that Tom had a hidden compartment somewhere in the house.

"I had just about given up after all but tearing both the house and garage apart. One day I noticed that the back of a drawer in a kitchen cabinet was soiled, as if it had been handled many times. I pried off the board and there was the access way to a treasure trove of machine guns. It was like opening King Tut's tomb - wonderful things."

The guns were now in hand, but was the



Right: This famous 1972 mug shot may have led to the false rumor that McQueen could not own guns. It was taken after a DUI arrest in Anchorage, Alaska.

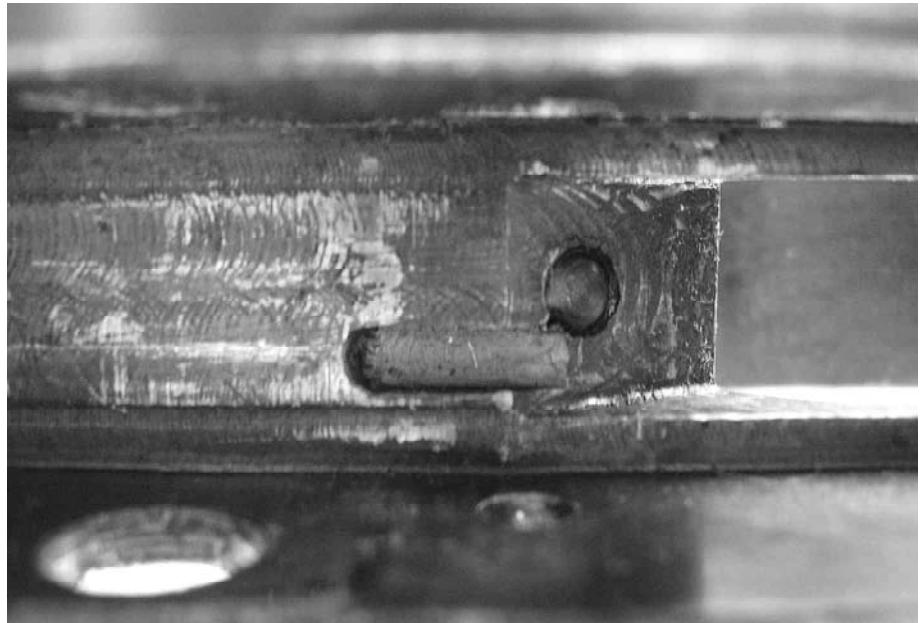
story behind the guns accurate?

The two Colt Thompsons already had received some notoriety in Roger Cox's 1982 book, *The Thompson Submachine Gun*, but few details were provided other than the information that they were originally owned by the New Mexico State Prison and were "the only 27s known to have been so converted" by the factory to 1928 Navy models.

A quick search of the internet found that McQueen was not a felon. Yes, he had spent time in a boy's reformatory school and in the brig after going AWOL. And, of course, there was that famous mug shot of him in 1972 for driving under the influence. But, he received an honorable discharge from the Marines and nothing in his life reached the level that would have prohibited him from owning guns. In fact, his third wife and widow, Barbara Minty, auctioned off part of his gun collection in 2006.

The 2006 edition of Gordon Herigstad's authoritative book, *Colt Thompson Serial Numbers*, listed Steve McQueen as the owner of SN#5238 as follows:

"Steve McQueen purchased this Thompson through his own company, 'Sir Sidney's Submachine Gun Sales, Inc.' (aka, S&S Arms Co.), 414 Coors Blvd. S.W., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87105. Note: Steve McQueen owned this gun shop. McQueen's name was Sidney J. McQueen. When McQueen had free time from acting, he and his friends would go on extended trips into the New Mexico desert, in McQueen's Half Track, and hold military maneuvers, and shoot until their



Above: Cutout inside the 1927 trigger frame to allow for the larger semiautomatic rocker.

hearts content."

Here was another link between McQueen and at least one of these submachine guns, but was this accurate? A quick directory check found that S&S Arms Co. is still listed. Sidney Garris answered the phone and after a few chuckles upon hearing these stories, he stated, "My birth name is 'Garris', but from 1952 through 1985, I was using my stepfather's name 'McQueen'. The gun business was called Sir Sidney's Sidearm Sales and I am the Sidney J. McQueen in the book you mentioned.

"Don Packingham and I formed S&S Arms Company to deal in automatic weapons, convert semiautomatics to full autos, and to manufacture the Sidewinder that I invented and receivers for the American 180. The original name was too long to stamp on our products so we shortened it to 'S&S Arms,' standing for 'Sam and Sid.' Sam is Don's middle name." Both Sidney and Don are no

strangers to *Small Arms Review*, with an article appearing in the August 2006 issue on the Sidewinder.

Sidney went on, "Years before he had taken lessons from a local martial artist, Sam Allred, and later they became good friends. The other McQueen (laugh) visited Albuquerque several times while Ali McGraw, his second wife, was filming *Convoy* in the area with Kris Kristofferson. Steve was friends with Sam, and Don arranged a machine gun shoot."

Sam is not the typical martial arts instructor that you find in strip malls across the country. He is a 9th degree grand master and was initiated into the Black Belt Hall of Fame as "Man of the Year." His circle of friends over the years has included Chuck Norris, Bruce Lee and Pat Johnson, the fight choreographer for movies such as the *Karate Kid* series and *Mortal Kombat*. It was easy tracking down a famous person such as this, even though he is retired and now lives in Mexico. Sam picks up the story from here.

"In the early 70s, Pat Johnson invited me to attend a private karate workout for Steve McQueen. I became friends with Steve, who would occasionally visit me in Albuquerque. In 1978 my friend Don Packingham invited us into the desert to fire machine guns. Steve had real misgiv-



Left: Fire control components: (Top) Semiautomatic 1927. (Bottom) Full Auto 1921. From left to right: fire control lever; rocker; sear lever; sear.

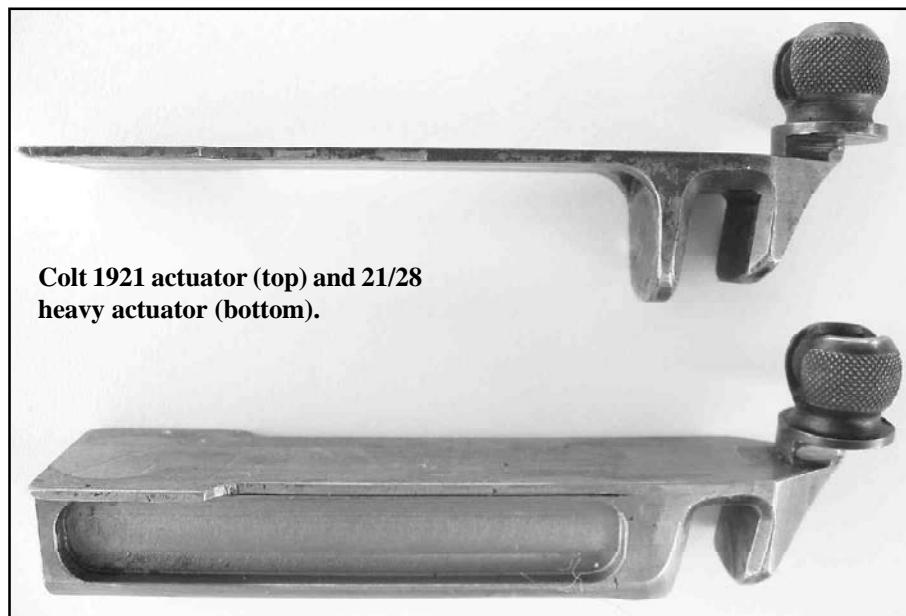
ings and bet me that the shoot would turn into a circus of spectators. I won the bet. Steve, Don and his son and I were present. I asked a Channel 13 news photographer to come film the event as a favor to me. I was working there as a weathercaster.

“Steve had a full beard and no one would have recognized him. He told me that he had a fantastic time and that he had only shot movie prop machine guns. This was his first experience shooting ‘real machine guns’ aside from the rigid confines of basic training in the Marines.” McQueen was in an armored unit, and he was no stranger to guns in the movie business, including the Thompson he used in the movie *Never So Few*.

Bowling for Columbine

Don Packingham continues the story, “In the early 1970s, I picked up both of those Model 27s from the State Penitentiary in a straight trade for two American 180s that we were making at S&S Arms. We manufactured the receivers and imported the other parts from Austria. I brought these Thompsons and a number of other machine guns with me to the shoot with McQueen.

“Steve came across as a regular guy. He



Colt 1921 actuator (top) and 21/28 heavy actuator (bottom).

took my ferocious kidding and gave it right back. When he was shooting a BAR, he commented about how heavy the gun is at which point I replied, ‘Well you sure seemed to wield it around effortlessly in *Sand Pebbles*.’ His response was, ‘Yeah, but most of the time it was a wooden prop.’ Steve was even willing to shoot a MG-42 from the hip. He really enjoyed that.”

Very few copies of the film were ever

made. According to Sam, “Steve said he preferred that it not be used at that time. Later after Steve died, I was working at Channel 7 in Denver, Colorado and the station wanted to use the clip of us shooting Thompsons as part of a broader story about me. I asked Steve’s close friend Pat Johnson his opinion and he said to go ahead and use it.”

Don indicated that another brief clip was

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used in, of all places, the movie *Bowling for Columbine*. The sub header for this film is, "Are We a Nation of Gun Nuts or Are We Just Nuts?" and clearly, the person shown shooting an MG-42 from the hip is portrayed as one of those "nuts." He could not fathom how Michael Moore got the footage and was not happy about this at all, to say the least. Suspicion is that a low-level archivist working for the production company called around, possibly to Channel 7 or 13, and found what he thought was footage of "gun nuts."

Steve's son, Chad McQueen, was contacted for this article and he confirmed that he had no knowledge of his father appearing in *Bowling for Columbine*. Several attempts were made to contact Michael Moore to determine if even he knew, but he did not respond. NRA headquarters also was contacted and a media spokesperson asked around and reported that, "Most people were surprised, but a few indicated that they knew." It was not revealed how they found out since, "Moore never asked for our advice when he was making that movie."

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but not wanting to raise their blood pressure by watching the entire film or putting a dollar into Moore's hands, can rent the DVD and fast forward to Scene 8, Littleton at minute 20:31. The original film of this shoot is now owned by Sam Allred.

Conclusions

The provenance is now unmistakable: both guns went new from the factory in 1928 to the New Mexico State Prison and then back to Auto-Ordnance to be converted to 1928 Navy over-stamps. From there they were traded to Don Packingham through the company S&S Arms who sold them to Terry Williams. Timothy Maloney bought them next and finally, they made their way into the collection of Charles Olsen. It is incredible that these Thompsons have remained side-by-side throughout their 80-year history.

In this journey, the pair crossed the paths of a famous martial artist, Sam Allred, and at the time, Steve McQueen, one of the highest paid movie stars in history. A brief snippet of that event was immortalized in an Academy Award-winning documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*. Used by Michael Moore to illustrate the penultimate "gun nut," in reality, he was showing the very icon of "Mr. Cool." This heretofore little-known fact may become the greatest metaphor for how this film distorted the truth to push an agenda.

Because of the association of Don with both McQueen's (Sidney and Steve), the rebellious history of McQueen's life and Steve's appearance in the now infamous film, it is easy to see why confusion could reign and the stories could metamorphose. Which brings us back to the point made earlier in this article: taking the time to do the research can reveal both the unknown and the rewarding, and sometimes even the incredible.

(Acknowledgements: Chad McQueen (actor and Steve McQueen's son), Charles Olsen (current owner), Curt La Manna (Class 2 manufacturer and firearms appraiser), Don Packingham (original owner), George Rich (owner of unaltered Model 1927), Gordon Herigstad (Colt Thompson expert), Sam Allred (martial artist and television weathercaster (retired)), Sidney (McQueen) Garris (S&S Arms) and Terry Williams (second owner).



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