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BOOK REVIEW

The M1 Carbine A Revolution in Gun Stocking. Grafton H. and Barbara W. Cook, Andrew Mowbray Publishing Co. PO Box 460, Lincoln, Rhode Island 02865-0460. 1 800-999-4697. 208 pages. \$29.95 plus shipping. ISBN: 1-931464-00-6.

“Our book is about the U.S. M1 Carbine, Cal. .30: the development of the gun by Winchester, the production of the gun by giant Inland Division, the stock manufacture by mid-sized S.E. Overton Company, and the design of the revolutionary woodworking machinery built by smaller J.S. Richardson Company. Also included is a discussion of hardwood lumber and, more specifically, the unique role of the walnut industry in two world wars. We list and discuss those lumber producers who furnished fitches and blanks to the stock subcontractors – a rifle without a stock is unthinkable. In addition to the Carbine, this book is an industrial history of two companies and the families that created them, a social history, and a glimpse of a small city, South Haven, that, like so many in America, responded to its nation’s needs during WWII.”

So begins “The M1 Carbine, A Revolution in Gun Stocking,” by Grafton H. and Barbara W. Cook. As aptly stated above, this book is really the history of three forward-thinking and innovative companies, who combined their talents for efficient mass-production, and then went on to lead the Ordnance Industry in the manufacture of gunstocks and carbines during WWII.

The primary focus is on the Overton Company, with a detailed personal biography of the owners, the employees and their products from its founding in 1903 to its slow and painful demise in 1991. Initially specializing in a diverse array of difficult-to-manufacture wooden carvings and moldings, Overton’s business relationship with Inland began in 1923, when the latter contracted for wooden steering wheels and molding for automobile interiors.

The authors then introduce us to the development of the M1 Carbine, the Ordnance Department’s adoption of the Winchester design, and Inland’s subsequent selection as the leader in the adaptation of this weapon to efficient mass-production.

The important role of the J.S. Richardson Company is also detailed. This company designed and built radical new machinery to mass-produce wooden gunstocks, including the “Z-arm router,” which was “the heart and soul of carbine gunstock production,” and a ten-spindle copy lathe, later known as the PGL, for production of the difficult M1A1 pistol grip. Richardson also made handguards for the Carbine and M1917 Enfield.

In researching this book, the authors first obtained all of Overton’s records, studied all existing documentation on the other manufacturers, and then sought out and interviewed as many former employees as they could find. The combined result of these efforts is a unique snapshot of America’s “Arsenal of Democracy,” in which small businesses in small towns made immense contributions to the war effort, giving our soldiers the material advantage that was needed to assure victory.

Although this book contains some very interesting information for enthusiasts of the M1 Carbine, it is not a carbine collector’s book, per se. Rather, it will appeal more to students of “homefront” WWII history, and those interested in the industrial strengths and weaknesses of our nation. If the reader is looking for information on how to restore an arsenal-rebuilt Inland carbine to as-manufactured condition, or which specific serial numbers were initially assembled into M1A1 paratrooper stocks, he will be disappointed. But if the reader is interested in learning HOW the carbine stock was manufactured and mass-produced, he’ll find a wealth of background information on the who/what/where/when of wooden gunstock production, flavored with humorous anecdotes and interesting behind-the-scenes material. In this regard, the authors have excelled in providing us an education in a facet of the TOTAL history of the M1 Carbine that has not, until now, been given adequate attention or appreciation.

In addition, this 200-page book is chock-full of previously-unpublished, super-sharp, well-captioned photos, that were rescued from the trash bin or archival obscurity by the authors. Included are the detailed 42 steps in producing the carbine stock.

In regards to Carbine (and M1 Garand) production, it would be inappropriate and impractical to list every specific fact and number in this book that the reviewers found interesting, but the following information will provide a glimpse of what the authors uncovered in their research, and which will probably whet the appetite of the advanced carbine collector and historian:

-In the fall of 1941, a very strained relationship existed between Springfield Armory (and the Ordnance Department) and Winchester, in regards to the production of the M1 Garand Rifle. With the Ordnance Department’s blessing, Inland Division (and stock supplier Overton) were working up a bid to produce M1s (possibly to replace Winchester?!). But with the selection of Winchester’s carbine design in November, Ordnance changed its mind and asked Inland to lead the mass-production effort of this weapon instead.

-Overton shipped its first batch of stocks to Inland on May 27, 1942 and suggested numerous design changes to increase the efficiency of production, including the “O slot” and “low wood” features. Inland’s first 71 carbines were shipped on June 6, 1942.

-Because the color of walnut varies considerably between the sapwood (cream) and the heartwood (dark brown), “sap stain” was applied with an airbrush to give carbine stocks a uniform color. Raw linseed oil was used as a finish during WWII, and replaced by Chinawood (tung) oil in the ‘50s.

-Inland/Overton’s subcontractors for stock and handguard hardware are listed on page 78.

-In a funny story reminiscent of Mr. William H. Doerfner's aggravations with incompetent government inspectors at Saginaw Steering Gear, Mr. Russ Overton (head of gunstock production) threw all seven inspectors out of his plant after a careless incident by one of them.

- Russ Overton hated the M1A1 stock, calling it "fussy and difficult to machine," and the pistol grip "a woodworker's nightmare." Compounding his frustration, Royal Typewriter Company - the subcontractor for the manufacture of the folding metal "skeleton" and the designated supplier of the completed M1A1 stock - performed so poorly that Inland took over the component assembly process in May 1944 (when Inland's second run of M1A1 carbines started up.)

-Overton made the M1A1 pistol grips on its machinery until October 1943 (the end of the first run), before turning over production of these to Jairus Richardson, whose unique PGL Machine was much better and much more economical. This no-doubt is indicated by the change from (what collectors refer to as) the "square, straight, blocky" OI-marked pistol grip to the more slender, curved and rounded contour of the RI-marked grip!

-The "on again, off again, start and stop" aspect of M1A1 orders from the government probably accounts for the fact that no records have ever been found for the specific Inland serial numbers assembled as M1A1s.

-Springfield Armory bought the PGL Machine (there was only one!) in December 1944, and produced thousands of M1A1 stocks in 1945-1946. January 1945 marked the end of Inland/Overton's production of the paratrooper's "short stock."

-The most intriguing number found in Overton's records, is the wartime quantity of 239,747 total M1A1 stocks produced and delivered to Inland. However, the Ordnance Department's official wartime records, with figures presumably supplied by Inland, state that only 140,882 M1A1 carbines were produced between 1942-1945. The difference is almost 100,000 extra folding stocks! This figure would seem excessive for "field replacements," and both the authors and the reviewers are unable to explain this.

-In the section of the book that discusses all twelve manufacturers of the M1 Carbine stock, we learn that:

Between October -- December 1943, Overton reworked 30,000 "scrap" Rock-Ola stocks that had failed inspection, and then shipped them to Inland. These stocks had been received by Underwood from the Carbine Industry Integration Committee, but they subsequently rejected them for being "out of spec."

Also, the authors report that Sprague & Carleton was the first mass-producer of birch stocks for the carbine, for IBM in 1943. Overton/Inland followed much later, in April and May 1945, with birch M2 stocks.

Yellow birch, although superior to walnut, didn't gain general acceptance by the tradition-minded Ordnance Department until the '50s, which initially required that the stocks be stained to resemble walnut.

During WWII, Jamestown Lounge produced carbine stocks in walnut, birch, and cherry. These went to Standard Products and IBM.

Overton continued producing carbine stocks for Inland's government contracts as late as 1947, and then for Rock Island Arsenal until 1971. Initially awarded a contract to produce M1 Garand stocks for International

Harvester in 1951, Overton also built M1 stocks for Springfield Armory, Harrington & Richardson, as well as replacement stocks for the government through the 1960's.

Approximately 300,000 M14 stocks were also manufactured for TRW until the change to fiberglass stocks was mandated by the military.

Overton continued to produce carbine stocks for the numerous commercial manufacturers of carbines, as well as wood for many other sporting arms, including its role as Winchester's sole supplier of stocks for 13 models in the 1970's. An impressive list of gunstocks produced for the civilian market takes up three pages in this book. However, by the mid-1980's, changing economic conditions were steadily eroding Overton's business and, in 1991, it closed its doors for good.

The only criticism of this book would be a lack of careful editing and proof-reading, which resulted in numerous redundancies (the exact same information repeated one or more times), conflicting information (e.g., reporting that the military switched from wooden to fiberglass M14 stocks in 1966 – page 184 – and in 1964 – page 186), spelling errors (e.g., M1 Grand, Onsud Company), and misinformation (e.g., describing IHC as “the tractor people from Moline, Illinois.” That's actually John Deere; IHC produced in Evansville, Indiana.)

One more “final chop” by a hardcore collector of military rifles would have prevented the publication of these unfortunate errors in an otherwise fine book. “The M1 Carbine, A Revolution in Gun Stocking” is recommended. An autographed copy is available from the authors at: P.O. Box 143, Dowagiac, MI 49047

Or it can be ordered toll-free at 1-800-999-4697 or online at – order@manatarmsbooks.com

Cost is \$29.95 plus \$4.50 postage/handling.

Review written by Marty Black and Dan Eichelberger, for the Carbine Club.

ADDENDUM TO BOOK REVIEW

Before the above book review was published, it was shown to noted Carbine experts Fred Powers and Bob Eakins. Both had interesting comments:

Fred Powers is of the opinion that 99,000+ spare M1A1 stocks is not an excessive number, but is indicative of the Army's (and Marine Corps') projected needs in possible future airborne operations during WWII. Marty Black's study of period photographs does seem to indicate that the late-war Airborne Divisions (11th, 13th and 17th, and 503rd PIR) may have had proportionally greater numbers of M1A1 carbines than the earlier divisions (82nd and 101st).

In regards to the quality of various manufacturers' stocks, Bob Eakins checked an ordnance report filed by Standard Products in 1944, and reported:

“The best stocks were supplied by Hillerich & Bradsby Company. The quality of wood was superior, as was also inletting, turning and exterior finish. Walnut unquestionably was the best wood, although its quality varied greatly between their two subcontractors. The few birch stocks made by H&B were a close second to walnut. They were superior to the Jamestown Lounge walnut stocks in quality of wood. Stocks of wild cherry,

another substitute for scarce walnut were very poor. They were supplied by Jamestown Lounge, but the lot was largely rejected and the use of wild cherry was discontinued at the facility.”

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