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Grainger Bolt-Action Sporters Set a Standard

By Wayne LaPierre | 2016-12-15 | 0 Comments

Sporters for a second look: Grainger's bolt-action, Remington, and Winchester sidelocks offered a lot of value through World War II and beyond.

In the years before 1914 one could find, tucked away in a corner of the Sears, Roebuck catalog, a listing for a bolt-action sporting rifle from Germany. Variously listed as a Mauserbüchse, or a Hanover Manufacturer, or sometimes just a C.G. Haenel [pronounced HY-nul], these rifles were the first steps in a trend that became a deluge. Bolt-action sporting rifles based on military actions.

Generally now known as Sonnen Manufacturers, these German bolt-action rifles were cut cheap. In the 1902 Sears catalog the price was $15.50 for a rifle with a Mauser action and a Mauser-type trigger. The Mauser Model 98 Sporter import worth 30 percent more than this state-of-the-art lever rifle? And why, when Model 98s are priced by collectors, are Haenel Manufacturer bolt actions cheap? Isn't it a few decades of early custom rifles?

There are two answers to that question, and relative quality has nothing to do with it. They are both finely made rifles, and some of the Haenels especially so.

For most gun collectors, the era of sporting bolt rifles begin with the Mauser 98.

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Everything good and modern occurred after that, they believe, and nothing much before. But such was not the case. In the frenzy of rifle development in Europe between the arrival of smokeless powder in 1886 and the ultimate Mauser in 1898, several good military bolt rifles made their debut. For sporting purposes, the most significant by far was the German Commission rifle of 1888.

For military collectors, the Gewehr 98 is almost a cult object, and while it has been widely copied, the 1888 has been underappreciated. It is sometimes called a Mauser-type Commission Rifle, and sometimes the reverse. In reality, however, the Commission rifle was neither Mauser nor Mänlicher, but the latest word of contrasts. A mechanical device designed by committee that was highly successful.

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Haenel's civilian rifles on the Commission action followed the German military rifle closely, with a cocking piece and a bolt-mounted safety button. Most had half-octagon barrels with full or partial metal stocks, nearly receiver ring, folding leaf sights, rebounded fore-ends and elegant turned-down bolt handles. There was usually a stock bolt in the forend, and sometimes they were fitted with receiver sights. Most had double set triggers. While the majority were chambered for the standard military 8×57 cartridge (usually the original .318" bullet, rather than the later .323") they were also offered in pistol hunting cartridges like the 8×57 JRS.

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The first importer of Haenel Manufacturers was Oscar Heine of New Jersey, who began bringing them into the U.S. in 1894. There was a strong demand for them, and Heine expanded into all of the U.S., German immigrant gunmakers and the German companies, no more and more importers in get into the act, and such, it seemed, stipulated little changes to the overall design. As a result, the number of minor variations seems endless.

Steyr was not the only company to appreciate the virtues of the Commission rifle. C.G. Haenel, a prominent German gunmaking company in Suhl, also made Commission rifles under contract. Founded by Carl Gottlieb Haenel in 1840, C.G. Haenel quickly became a force in German gunmaking and, like most German firms, produced sporting weapons when it was not filling military contracts.

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This brings us back to the two major reasons there is only minor collector interest in these rifles. The first, of course, is the lack of a famous name such as Winchester. The second is the impossibility of classifying rifles by model and year. Model classification and certifiable originality are the backbone of gun collecting, and while Haenel Manufacturers and other civilian rifles based on the Commission action, are well made, they are custom. There were too many variations, and too many small gunsmiths at the other end, and far too many variations in between.

For the modern rifle lover though, Haenel's in their many guises offer an interesting alternative. Most are chambered for cartridges that are materials, workmanship and finishing are comparable to fine, modern, custom rifles. On the negative side, they are chambered for cartridges like the 8×57 and 9×57 that today's standards are relatively low velocity and suitable only for short-range hunting.

Collecting Haenel Manufacturers may never make you any money but it can lead into exploration of a fascinating byway in the history of the sporting rifle. You will find early Manufacturers from Steyr as well as German and Austrian custom makers, and you will find custom-ordered takedown rifles and modified Gewehr 98s.

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There was life before the Mauser 98 and the evidence lies – as with so much of American life – in the pages of the old Sears, Roebuck with both.

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