

A Belgian Copy of the Winchester Model 1873

During his research about Belgian handguns used in the Congo colony, the author found some interesting details regarding lever-action rifles brought to Africa. The results were published in the German magazine *Deutsches Waffen-Journal*, DWJ, in January 2011. Reprinted here with permission of the author, Dr. Dirk Ziesing, and the publisher, *Deutsches Waffen-Journal*.

By: Dr. Dirk Ziesing



Stanley and Livingstone

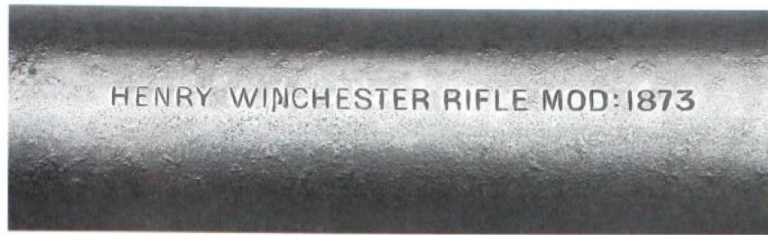
Belgium's activities in Africa were initiated by the journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley (1841 – 1904). He had his first but intense contact with the dark continent during his well-known search for the Scottish missionary named Livingstone in 1871. In his book *"How I found Livingstone,"* Stanley gives exhaustive details regarding the armament of the expedition members. His list consists of the following weapons of defense:

- 1 double-barrel breech-loading gun, smooth bore
- 1 American Winchester rifle, sixteen-shooter
- 1 Henry rifle, sixteen-shooter
- 2 Starr breech-loaders
- 1 Jocelyn breech-loader
- 1 elephant rifle, carrying balls eight to the pound
- 2 breech-loading revolvers
- 24 muskets, flint locks
- 6 single-barreled pistols
- 1 battle-axe
- 2 swords
- 2 Persian daggers
- 1 boar-spear
- 2 American axes, 4 lbs. each
- 24 hatchets
- 24 butcher-knives

When Stanley departed, he left the following with Livingstone: one each of the Joslyn and Starr carbines and 2000 cartridges; the Henry rifle and 1500 cartridges; one revolver and 200 cartridges.

Winchester Model 1873 Copy made in Liège

The model of 1873 is one of the most popular Winchester guns. It was built from 1873 to 1923 with a total of 720,610 specimens. Before 1879, the only caliber was .44-40 (.44 WCF), later on .38-40, .32-20 and .22 were to follow. The tubular magazine of the .44 carbine version, attached to a 20 inch barrel, takes twelve cartridges whereas the musket's capacity is fifteen, having a barrel length of 30 inches.



Barrel Roll Marking



On the other hand, old lever-action repeaters of Belgian production are very rare today. Either their initial quantity was quite low, or rough use in the colonies depleted existing stocks. Nevertheless, examples are known for the Winchester model 1873 as well as for its successor, the Model 1876. In both cases, surviving examples bear inspector marks of the national gun factory. These are the typical stamps showing the letters "EB" under a crown, found on the left plate, on the right side of the butt and on the wooden forend. As any indication for a private manufacturer is missing these guns could in fact be made directly under governmental control. And, as Belgium's Territorial Army never used lever-actions they could only be meant for use in the Congo Free State.



Belgian Dust Cover

Belgian Proofed "EB" Under Crown

This article is in particular based on one Belgian model 1873 copy whose characteristics are described as follows. First of all, existing marks of Liège's civilian proof-house make us date the gun between 1877 (inspector's stamp with an asterisk) and 1893 ("ELG" in an oval).

Within the chronology of the original Winchester 1873, one has defined three basic types with again several steps of evolution in particular for type one. So, our Belgian candidate shows attributes of types one and two but nothing of type three. With the latter appearing around serial no. 86,000 the possible period of production may be refined again as this serial fell into the year 1882.

U.S. originals are marked "WINCHESTER'S - REPEATING - ARMS. NEW HAVEN. CT." and "KING'S - IMPROVEMENT . PATENTED - MARCH 29, 1866. OCTOBER 16, 1860" on top of the barrel. This refers to Henry's basic patent of 1860 and King's improved loading device of 1866. On such Winchesters, the denotation "MODEL. 1873" is to be found on the upper tang whereas the serial number is given on the lower tang.

Instead, the upper side of the barrel of the Belgian copy is marked with the short text "HENRY-WINCHESTER MODEL 1873". On the lower side, we find the mentioned proof marks and the metric caliber given as 10.6 millimeters, equaling .44 inches.

One quite particular feature of the Belgian copy is the two rails for the sliding dust cover inside the walls of the receiver. This feature has been applied to early U.S. production, but since 1879 was replaced by one center rail below the dust cover. At first, this rail was a separate part but later on it was machined as an integral part of the receiver. Having said this we notice that the Belgian sliding cover has a "tail" that appeared rather late at the second U.S. type. In accordance with this variant, the trigger pin is seen on the outer side. At the end of type one, the finger lever was modified. Before, the form of the model 1866 was still used. In Liège, they also decided in favor of the new form of the finger lever latch.

The front band connecting barrel and magazine tube near the muzzle also has a milled front sight on top. This is found on early U.S. carbines of the first type. Accordingly, the "L"-type rear sight is graduated in steps of 100, 300 and 500 meters. U.S. examples have the same one scaled in yards.

Whereas US carbines usually have no sling swivels, these are present on the Belgian gun. As this corresponds to the musket version, such carbines are sometimes declared to be shortened muskets. Winchester hunting rifles can be distinguished by forend tips made of steel, crescent buttplates and octagonal barrels. None of these features is found on the Belgian gun, so it may be called a standard carbine meant for military use.

The cartridge lifter is made of brass, just like those of U.S. originals. This is valid, too, for the trap door covering the cleaning rod compartment drilled into the stock.

As already mentioned, this particular gun has been marked by an unknown inspector using the stamp "S" below an asterisk. Such markings were used in Liège since 27 January 1877. But, this letter "S" might also have a very particular meaning.

The pattern collection of the Winchester Corporation once contained two guns similar to the model 1873, acquired in Europe around 1911/1912 by E. L. Uhl, designer at Winchester during that time. Unfortunately, these guns have disappeared since the collection was dispersed. According to the inventory list, they were marked with the dates "1880" and "1881" and a crown above. Rumors said they had been manufactured by Spangenberg in the town of Suhl (located in Eastern Germany) – and supposed to be used in the German colonies!

First of all, before the year 1884 there were no German colonies at all. Secondly, in Suhl absolutely nothing is known about such lever-action rifles. On the other hand, the colonial trace leads us to Belgium and finally the letter "S" of the Belgian gun inspector could have been mistaken for the logo of Spangenberg.

Winchester Model 1876 Copy Made in Liège

Belgian copies of popular lever-action guns are not restricted to the model 1873 but also its successor was copied. The Winchester 1876 was an overall strengthened version, accepting stronger ammunition: .40-60, .45-60, .45-75 and finally .50-95.

A well-known U.S. dealer recently offered a Belgian model 1876 copy that has exactly the same acceptance marks as the 1873 carbine presented here. This one is a musket with full stock and 34 inch barrel. In this case, too, we have no markings or stamps providing any hint of manufacturer or purpose of use. Anyway, the almost mint condition rules out service in the African colony, and therefore it might just be a kind of sample.

Winchester Model 1894 in the Belgian Congo

The use of lever-action rifles in the Congo was continued in the 20th century. For a long time there was confusion regarding some Winchester saddle-ring carbines model 1894, which obviously came from the Belgian Congo. Their origin has been discovered recently by Michael Carrick and published in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Winchester Collector*.



It was a delivery that initially went to the French army during the Great War. Remington acted as a middleman, having already furnished rolling block rifles to France. Within two orders, dated 22 September 1914, "for French Govt." they ordered 15,100 carbines model 1894 together with 15.1 million cartridges of the corresponding .30-30 caliber. Dispatch happened between 13 October 1914 and 6 April 1915. All currently known serial numbers lie above 650,000, e.g. 659,874, 682,296, 683,421, 684,838.