

A Lament for Custer's Troops

Recently I encountered a problem that was akin to that known by Custer's men at the Little Big Horn and doubtless by many others in the Old West. Having collected old firearms for over sixty years I had known that there was such a thing as a headless shell extractor: used with the early 45-70 cartridges. In the 1960s I visited the Custer Battlefield and bought a fired 45-70 and a 50-70 case that an Indian adjacent to the field had found when digging postholes. They were both inside primed and bore no head stamp. As a cartridge collector, I also knew about the early copper colored center fire cartridges with the crimps near the head. This crimp held a primer inside the case, thus the term "inside primed". Those cartridges were only one of many experiments in the development of cartridges, as we know them today. The inside primed cartridges were center fire instead of the well-known rim fires used in the Henry and Spencer firearms of that era.

Some time ago I purchased two boxes of cartridges at a gun show. The printed label read "20 US Springfield carbine cartridges caliber 45; Charge 55 grains musket powder; Bullet 405 grains Frankfort arsenal July 1874". Both boxes were open and the 405 grain bullets removed from them. I felt it would be nice to have a box complete, so I proceeded to load some 405 grain bullets into the cases. The loading tool I chose was an 1894 Winchester. I was very fond of that tool since it was the first tool I ever had. It came to me nearly 70 years ago. I seated the bullet and proceeded to remove the loaded round from the chamber of the tool. Guess what! I had only the head of the cartridge. How thin that case was. Now I knew why they had headless shell extractors. Since the 1984 tool was glass hard I managed to get it cleaned of the bullet and pieces of the case.

I now knew how Custer's men felt when one of those cases broke off in the chamber of their model 1873 Springfield carbines making it useless. My two boxes of cartridges were loaded only two years after the 1873 45-70 carbines like those that Custer's men used were issued and about two years before the Custer Massacre in 1876. Was there a difference between Custer's troopers and me? Yes! I did not have a great number of Indians shooting at me and my life did not depend on a cartridge case that would not separate in the chamber.

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