

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Early Single-Shot Lever-Actuated Breech-Loading Rifles & Carbines

By: Jim Taylor

The period between the percussion era and the metallic cartridge era was time of great experimentation. All sorts of ideas for improving the muzzle-loading type of firearm were put forth. Some of these ideas are still with us today in one form or another. Others barely saw the light of day. All were innovative.

The repeating rifle was the goal for many, but it was the natural outgrowth of the single-shot rifle. Before the repeater could become reality a reliable and safe breech-loading mechanism had to be developed. Many ideas for a breech-loading mechanism were tried over the years starting with the flintlock rifles, with varying degrees of success.

While there were a number of ingenious ways employed in developing a breech-loader, in this article we concentrate on lever-actuated designs. We are Leverguns.Com after all.

There were a number of lever-action designs for opening the breech. Some were of the "tip-up" or "break open" design. Others slid the barrel forward while still others were of the "falling block" type. Some were of the "rising breech" design and there were also various "pivoting breech" designs. Within each of these types there are variations that make all of them very interesting. Some of these ideas are still with us in modern single shot rifles while many others just could not make the transition to the new higher-pressure smokeless powders that were introduced by the early 1900's.

I need to explain the following list:

First, it is not complete. I am no expert on the subject and am simply reporting on what I have found. I am sure I have overlooked or missed some.

Second, it only covers those single-shot breechloaders that are lever-actuated AND that were made *before 1900*. There are a number of lever-actuated single-shot rifles, carbines and shotguns that have been made since that time. I have not made an attempt to list them. That will have to wait for another day.

Third, the list is not in order of manufacture. The firearms/makers are listed alphabetically.

- **Ballard** - When the lever was pulled down the breech tilted down at the front. Ballard's were produced by Ball & Williams, Merrimack Arms & Brown Mfg., Dwight, Chapin & Co., R. Ball, and finally after 1875 by

Marlin. They were made with many variations and in a large number of calibers. [Photo](#)

- **Bullard** - A falling block design that was produced in many types and variations in calibers .32 rimfire to .50 centerfire.
- **Burnside** - A falling block design, made in 54 caliber, the Burnside had a unique tape priming system to fire it's copper or foil cartridges. [Photo](#)
[Photo Action Open Top Photo Action Open Side](#)
- **C.B. Holden** - Called an "open frame", the entire right side of the receiver was exposed. A unique design, made in .44 rimfire.
- **Cosmopolitan** - Produced in .52 caliber, it was made in two designs. One was a falling block and one was a pivoting block.
- **Farrow Arms** - Made in various calibers, the Farrow was a falling block design similar to the Ballard and in fact, was an improvement upon the Ballard. [Photo](#)
- **Gallagher** - A .50 caliber, the barrel slides forward when the lever is lowered. [Photo](#)
- **Gibbs** - Made in .52 caliber, the barrel slides forward when the lever is lowered.
- **Gwyn & Campbell** - Called the "Union Carbine" or the "Grapevine Carbine", a falling block design made in .52 caliber. [Photo](#) [Photo Top](#)
[Photo Action Open](#)
- **Maynard** - Produced in a very large variety of models and designs from Boys Rifles to Sporting rifles in a wide variety of calibers. When the lever was lowered the barrel slid forward. [Photo](#)
- **Peabody** - Produced in many models, calibers and variations, the Peabody-Martini is one of the most well known. [Photo](#) [Action Photo](#)
- **Perry** - Made in .54 caliber, when the lever is lowered the breechblock pivots upward. [Photo](#) [Top Photo](#)
- **Remington-Beals** - Made in .32 and .38 rimfire, when the lever is lowered the barrel slides forward. Frames were made in both brass and iron.
- **Rising Breech** - Produced in Virginia for the Confederacy, this unique rifle used a .54 cal. paper cartridge. It is unsure who built these.
- **Schroeder** - A needle-fire gun and cartridge, when the lever is lowered the barrel slides forward.
- **Sharps** - One of the more recognizable/recognized single-shot lever actuated firearms, the Sharps was produced in many models, variations and calibers, all of the falling block design. The first was the Model 49, a percussion rifle. The design remained very much the same into the cartridge era. [Photo](#)
- **Sharps-type** - A copy of the Sharps percussion rifles, made for the CSA in Virginia. [Photo](#)
- **Starr** - produced in .54 caliber percussion and .52 caliber rimfire, lowering the lever lowered the breechblock and allowed it tip backwards. [Photo](#)
[TOP Photo](#)

- **Stevens** - This company produced a very large number of single-shot lever actuated designs, both in break open and falling block types. Two main categories were (1) Boy's Rifles and (2) Ideal Rifles. The Boy's Rifles include the *Marksman* in .22 rimfire - break open - [Photo](#)
- **Maynard Jr.** - .22 rimfire, action similar to the Maynard rifles.
- **Favorite** - .22 rimfire, falling block. [Photo](#) The Ideal Rifles were all of the falling block design and include the famous Walnut Hill Series. The Ideal Rifles were produced in various rimfire and centerfire designs and were noted for their extreme accuracy. [Photo](#)
- **Symmes** - .54 caliber, lowering the lever raises the breechblock and allows it to pivot backwards, exposing the chamber.
- **Whitney-Cochran** - .44 rimfire, lowering the lever raises the breechblock.
- **Whitney-Howard** - .44 rimfire and 20. a "hammerless" design. The action was weak and was noted to blow open at times.
- **Winchester** - Model 1885, made in 2 frame types: High Wall and Low Wall. A Browning falling block design that is still with us, it was produced in a very large variety of calibers (at least 45 different calibers) and options. [High Wall Photo](#) [Low Wall Photo](#)

I am sure I have missed some. There were a great many obscure gun-designers who were trying to get their ideas produced.

As I said, these were all BEFORE 1900! Since that time there have been quite a few single-shot lever-actuated designs marketed both in rifle, carbine and shotgun types. Interestingly the leveraction repeating shotgun is not dead. Why I do not know, but there still seems to be some market for them. These and the single-shots we will cover at a later date.

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