

HELL'S ANGELS ON HORSEBACK

THE UNITED STATES DRAGOONS

Richard Alan Dow

THE WESTWARD EXPANSION OF the American frontier into the vast and sprawling Great Plains, and the spirit of "manifest destiny" — the God-given right to conquest — that it produced, was personified in the regiments of dragoons organized to deal with the problems such expansion inevitably created.

The U.S. Dragoon quickly came to epitomize the bold, resourceful, adaptable frontiersman; his brawling, unorthodox, hell-for-leather spirit channelled into unit esprit that made the dragoons the elite of the new regular army during their existence.

Heavily armed with a variety of regulation and personal weapons, the dragoon is a romantic object of study and a fascinating collector focus.

Military historian Col. John R. Elting has noted that the dragoon concept stems from early 17th century Europe where infantrymen were mounted to move them quickly into positions in support of the cavalry "until the foot came up," and to do foraging and outpost work. Their short barrelled musket, called a *dragon* (early examples actually had a serpentine shape chiseled into the barrel with the mouth at the muzzle opening), gave them their name. At first, they always fought on foot, but subsequently their horses and weapons were improved to the point that they became, by the mid-18th century, "just another type of cavalry."

When encounters with mounted Indians on the plains dictated the need for cavalry in the U.S. Army, the First Regiment, U.S. Dragoons, was established in 1833 as a practical, versatile, and economical solution.

Replacing the non-uniformed and loosely organized Mounted Rangers, dragoons saw service to 1861 when they were redesignated as cavalry regiments. The high-point of their service, however, came during the Mexican War, where they served by squadrons and companies in various parts of Mexico, and shortly after as a peace-keeping force in the West during the gold rush and western settlement.

Of the many historical accounts of this period and of the dragoons' service during it, two of the most fascinating, in terms of depicting the spirit and lifestyle of the dragoon, were written by enlisted men in dragoon regiments.

Samuel Chamberlain's mock-heroic account of his Mexican War service with the First Regiment, U.S. Dragoons, *My Confession* (Harper & Brothers, N.Y., 1956; also published as *Recollections of a Rogue*, Museum Press, London, 1957) and Percival G. Lowe's *Five*

Years A Dragoon: 1849-1854 (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1965) dealing with the Indian wars, are filled with bits of information that official regulations and records lack.

One point should be clarified from the outset. The U.S. Dragoons were definitely *not* mounted infantrymen, using their horses as a means of transport from one theatre of action to another. The Regiment of Mounted Riflemen, in existence during roughly the same period, did fit this description, although even these favored a saber-swinging cavalry charge once they had fired their awkward and slow to reload rifles. As a matter of economy, and reflecting the need for adaptability on the frontier, the dragoons were trained and equipped to fight on both foot and horseback, but they were still essentially cavalrymen. Several schools of drill were experimented with — much more so than with other branches — including use of carbine, saber, and revolver equally, emphasis on the revolver, or stressing fighting on foot with carbine or rifle.

During the Mexican War, orders sent to General Zachary Taylor specified, "If there is no forage in the country, the dragoons must leave their horses and serve as infantry." And the 2nd Regiment of Dragoons, organized in 1836, had in fact been dismounted in 1842 for service as foot soldiers. They were remounted as dragoons in 1844 for the Seminole War and continued their mounted service in Mexico. (A 3rd Regiment was activated early in 1847, but saw little service and was disbanded at the end of the Mexican War.)

The duties performed by the dragoons during the Mexican War, in addition to scouting and battlefield cavalry maneuvers, included escort, dispatch riding, and tracking down deserters. They also provided the guard for general officers, on occasion protecting these worthies from their own subordinates as much as from the enemy. According to Chamberlain, Taylor's peace terms after the capture of Monteray were considered so lenient by many in the army that he "deemed it necessary to double the Dragoon guard around his Headquarters."

As a crack corps, highly (and sometimes brutally) disciplined by officers who had seen battle in the Seminole wars, the dragoons enjoyed a leniency in personal appearance that could include long hair, gold earrings, and non-issue additions to their regulation uniform. They were drawn from a colorful breed of men. Chamberlain notes that "In our squadron were broken down Lawyers, Actors and other men of the world."



Sam Chamberlain of the First Regiment, U.S. Dragoons in one of his Mexican War exploits (as drawn by himself). Note his shell jacket worn open over a white shirt. For some reason, Sam showed the piping on the sergeant's uniform as more orange than yellow. While the latter is usually noted as the color for the trim, orange was the branch color for the dragoons.

[From *My Confession* by Samuel Chamberlain, c. 1956 Time Inc. Reprinted by permission.]

Soldiers who had served under Napoleon, Polish Lancers, French Cuirassiers, Hungarian Hussars, Irishmen who had left the Queen's service to swear allegiance to Uncle Sam and wear the blue." Lowe, who rose to the rank of first sergeant in his troop, says, "we had a remarkably good set of men, some scholars, some good singers and quite a smattering of theatrical talent."

Uniforms

Although a full dress uniform had been prescribed in 1833 and is said to have been worn even on the frontier where it impressed Indians at ceremonies, the undress uniform was worn for field service. It comprised a dark blue shell jacket piped with yellow, blue-gray reinforced horsemen's trousers with a yellow stripe (two for sergeants), and a blue wool forage cap having the company letter in brass for enlisted men and a six-pointed star for officers. The 2nd Regiment, even more flamboyant, distinguished itself with a yellow band around the cap. A caped overcoat was carried in front of the pommel, and, from Chamberlain's sketches, was well used in the wet, cold periods of the Mexican campaigns.

Chamberlain's sketches further frequently depict him off duty with his jacket worn open and a white shirt underneath, or in the shirt without the jacket. And later, shirts were worn while on patrol, Lowe noting, "The Indians knew the troop, the sorrel horses, the blue shirts worn in the field in place of the regular uniforms, the drab hats . . ."

To the regulation uniform were added many non-issue extras. Again from Lowe: "Overshoes, mittens, gloves, leggings or other extra wraps were not then provided by the Government, nor kept for sale, and men made for themselves out of old blankets, skins, pieces of old canvas and cast-off clothing, anything that necessity prompted them to invent for protection from the bitter cold." And again, "I had on a very large red and yellow silk handkerchief, a luxury I always indulged in on the plains. I often tied it around my hat and brought it around so as to cover my neck and most of my face to keep off the sun and the pestiferous gnats. If not in use any other way it hung loosely around my neck to keep off the sun and wipe away perspiration . . . it cost me \$2.50."

The regulation belts worn with the uniform were white buff leather (black leather for all belts was specified by the *Ordnance Regulations* of 1852). The waistbelt was 2" wide and had an oval "US" plate in brass. The saber was suspended from it by two slings attached to rings at the left and rear of the belt, and a strap over the right shoulder supported the belt. A 2½" sling, fitted with a brass snap hook, was worn over the left shoulder and supported the carbine, which was equipped with a carrying ring on its breech. It is clear from Chamberlain's account that the carbine was not always carried on this sling when mounted. In one instance, forced from their horses by a Mexican ambush; "Lieutenant Campbell . . . sang out for us to get our horses together and take our

carbines from the gun boots and secure our extra ammunition from the saddle pouches . . ."

A white cloth haversack, with sewn-on strap, was carried over the right shoulder and used to hold rations and eating utensils. To this was usually attached a tin cup; on his Chamberlain had "etched . . . a rough design of a cavalry charge, with my initials."

Long Arms

The carbine (and later, the musketoön) was the arm that distinguished the dragoon from other forms of cavalry. The Hall breechloading carbine had been developed expressly for dragoon service. Its first model, of 1833, was initially produced at the Harper's Ferry Arsenal under the supervision of its inventor, John Hancock Hall. Most were made in Middletown, Connecticut, however, by Simeon North, who improved on the lock design. It was the first percussion arm adopted by the U.S. Army and considered by many to be the first arm produced by an assembly line technique with completely interchangeable parts. The Model 1833 was equipped with a rod bayonet, reflecting the dual role of the dragoon, but this was dropped from subsequent models. The Hall-North carbine during the Mexican War period was a cal. .52 smoothbore arm using .54 ball and paper cartridge. Its length overall was 40" and it weighed about 8 pounds. The barrel and furniture were browned, the full stock of oiled walnut and secured to the barrel with two bands. A steel sliding ring bar on the left provided for attachment to the carbine sling. Various lever designs were used to open the breech, the Model 1843 having a side lever patented by North and Savage in 1844.

An interesting feature of the weapon was its breechblock and trigger assembly which could be detached as a unit, by removing one screw, for use as a pocket pistol. Chamberlain says, "When not on duty, I went into town day and night, armed with a Bowie Knife and the chamber of my Hall's Carbine." On one occasion it payed off. Menaced by a gang of guerillas, "I sprang behind a large table used for a bar, drew the chamber of my Hall's Carbine (that I always carried in my pocket) . . . [at] the sight of the little iron tube . . . twenty brigands were held at bay by the strange weapon which they seemed to know was sure death to one of them."

The Hall-North carbine was typically marked "US" / "S.NORTH" / "MIDLtn" / "CONN" / (date) in five lines on the breechblock. A total of 20,500 were contracted for between 1833 and 1850 and all were apparently delivered.

The Model 1847 U.S. Cavalry Musketoön, manufactured at the Springfield Armory, replaced the Hall, and may have seen some service with the dragoons at the end of the Mexican War. It was certainly in use shortly after and is the arm referred to by Percival Lowe. It was a caliber .69 smoothbore weapon with a percussion lock, firing a paper cartridge. It was a muzzleloader, a step

backward in technology, but the breechloaders, although much more practical for mounted use, were still prone to problems and the conservative army attitude resisted their use until well into the Civil War. The musketoön was 41" long with a full stock in black walnut. The barrel was bright steel as was the lock, and the two barrel bands were brass. The ramrod had a button end and was held in place under the barrel by a stud and two short curved arms. A steel sliding ring bar was attached to the left side. The lock was marked with a spread eagle and "US" forward of the hammer, and "SPRING" / "FIELD" / (date) in three lines behind it.

Some 6,703 were manufactured at Springfield between 1847 and 1859. Some were modified for artillery use by replacing the sling ring with swivels and brazing on a bayonet stud.

Apparently at least one rifle was carried by each troop in addition to the carbines, primarily as a hunting weapon. (On long marches, the dragoons would have to live off the land for up to half their rations.) Chamberlain was given his troop's Hall rifle when sent on a dispatch riding mission; Lowe also had a rifle: "We had not seen a buffalo in more than two months or any fresh meat of any kind except some prairie dogs which Peel and I killed with the only rifle in the troop; no one hunted with it except us. The musketoöns did not shoot accurately enough, and no one was permitted to waste ammunition."

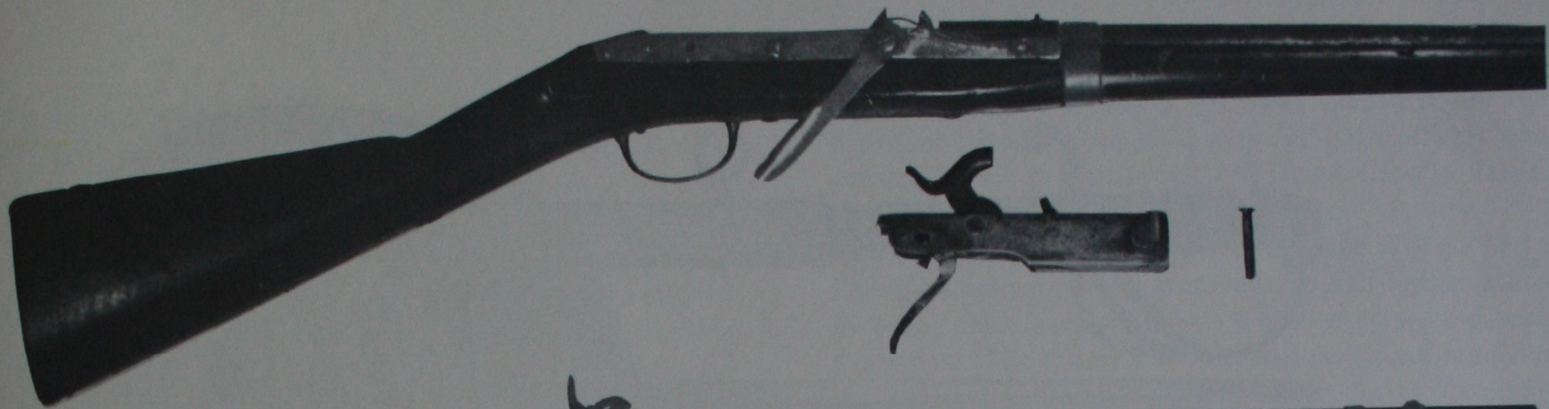
Pistols

Improvements being made to the revolver during this period would make it an important arm in the development of cavalry tactics, but in all likelihood this had little bearing on the Mexican War dragoon. Dragoons carried one or two pistols in saddle holsters, and these were initially Model 1836 flint pistols. The last of the U.S. martial flintlocks, they were made until 1844 and excelled in workmanship and balance.

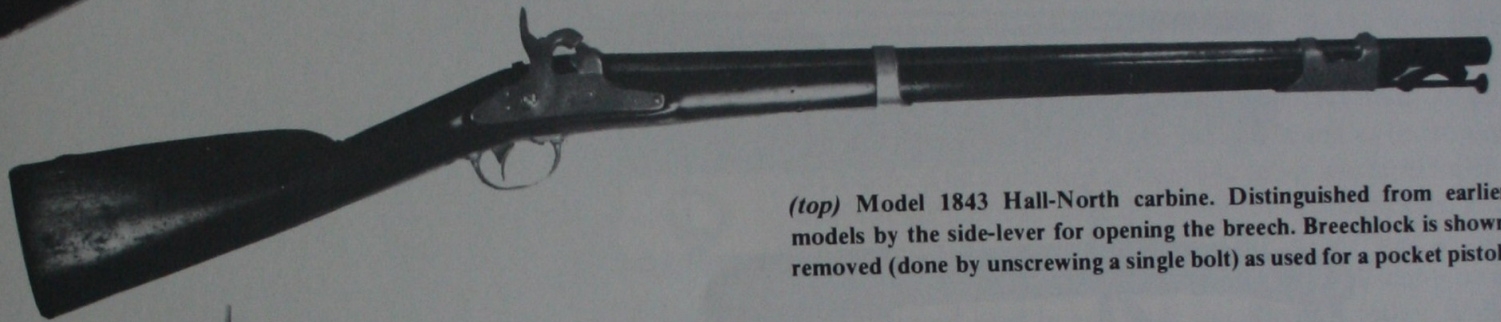
During the time the Dragoons were in Mexico, however, they might have been equipped, as an elite corps, with the new Model 1842 percussion pistol. Manufactured by Henry Aston of Middletown, Connecticut, this pistol was internationally recognized as the best martial pistol of its time. Of caliber .54 with a smoothbore barrel, it was 14" long and weighed 2 pounds 12 ounces. The barrel and lock were bright steel, the trigger blued. The mountings were brass and the arm had a ¾ length black walnut stock. A swivel ramrod was attached.

Marked "US" / "H ASTON" on the lock plate in front of the hammer and "MIDDtn" / "CONN." / (date) behind, and with government inspectors' initials stamped in the left side of the stock, 30,000 were ordered by a contract of February 25, 1845 at \$6.50 each with a five year delivery specified.

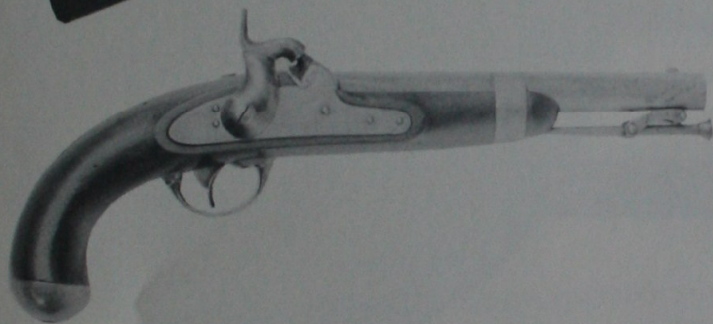
Considerable controversy surrounds the use of the Colt Walker revolver by dragoons during the Mexican



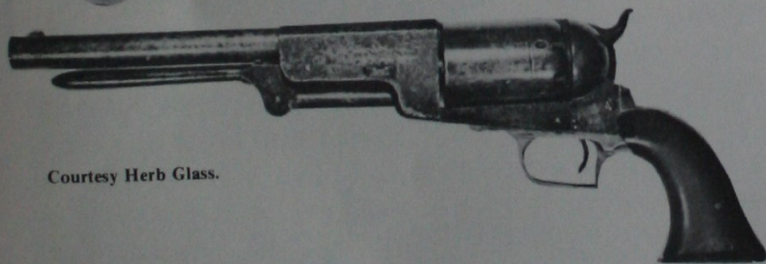
(top) Model 1843 Hall-North carbine. Distinguished from earlier models by the side-lever for opening the breech. Breechlock is shown removed (done by unscrewing a single bolt) as used for a pocket pistol



(middle) Model 1847 cavalry musketoon.



(bottom) Model 1842 percussion pistol by Aston.



Courtesy Herb Glass.

Colt 1847 percussion revolver. The so-called Whitneyville Walker.

War, but the fact that some were in circulation cannot be disputed. On July 6, 1847, Sam Chamberlain was "ordered to report to [Major D. H.] Rucker, who gave me a blessing, swore that I was more trouble than all the rest of the company, and ended by issuing me a Colt's Revolver, one of twelve sent to him for trial."

This was the so-called Whitneyville Walker, officially the Colt Army Percussion Revolver, Model 1847. A caliber .44, six shot, single action weapon, it was 15½" long and weighed a hefty 4 pounds 9 ounces. It had a blued steel finish on the barrel, cylinder, and trigger; a case-hardened frame, loading lever, and hammer; brass front sight and trigger guard; and walnut grips. The bluing has worn off most of the existing examples and an engraving on the cylinder showing a battle scene with Indians has also been almost universally obliterated.

Awarded a contract for 1,000 of these pistols on January 4, 1847, Samuel Colt found himself without a manufactory of his own and had them produced at the Eli Whitney Armory, Whitneyville, Connecticut, although they were marked along the top of the barrel "AD-

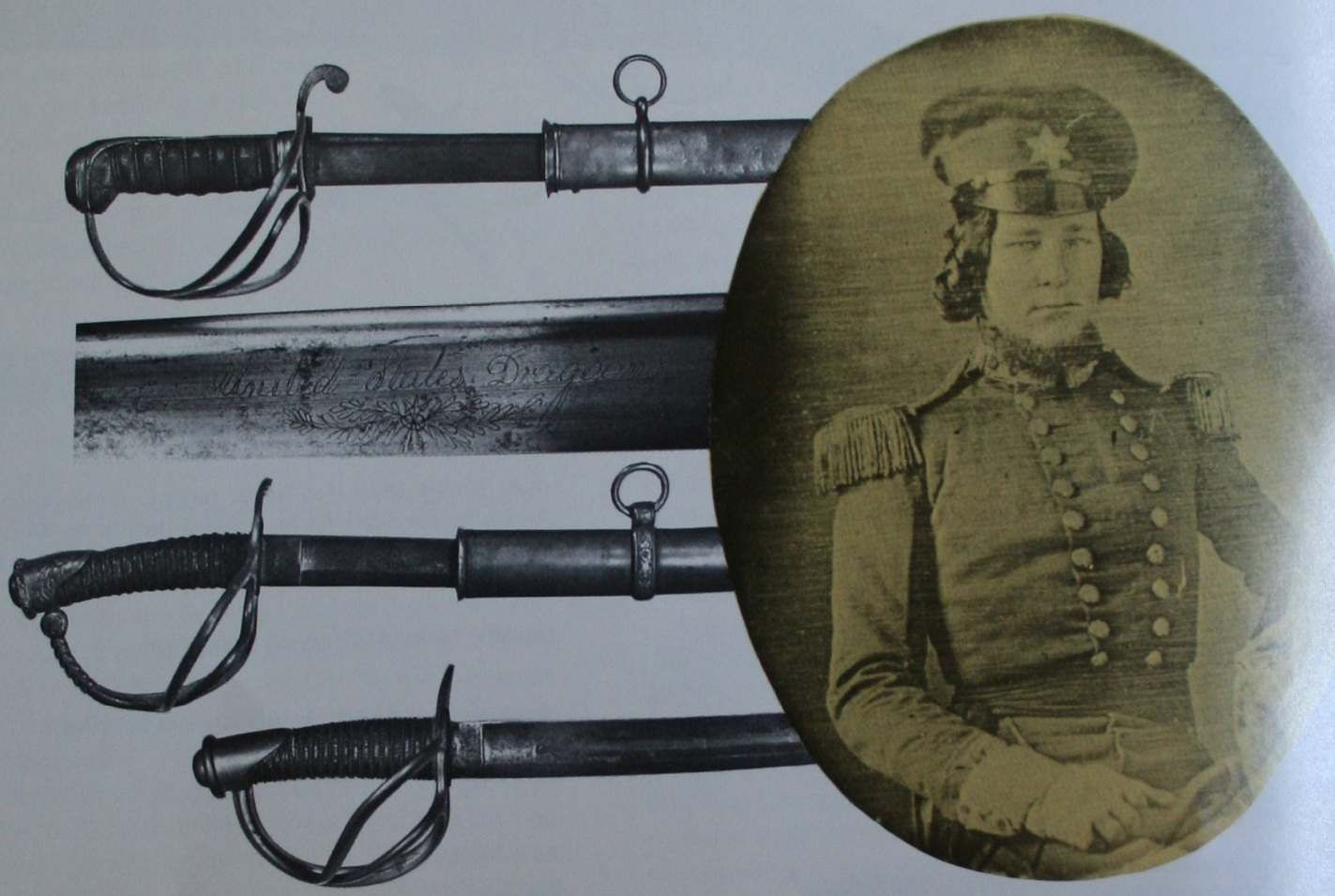
DRESS SAMI COLT NEW YORK CITY". The arms were designated in five series called "companies," and numbered with the "company" letter (A-E) and number from 1 to 200 (e.g. "C COMPANY No. 115"). Colt's reputation for impetuosity being what it was, it is entirely possible he began manufacture before the contract was actually received and had a trial quantity in the field by July.

The Whitneyville Walker was actually a copy, from memory, of a revolver made by Colt in 1839 allegedly at the request of the government of what was then the Lone Star Republic — Texas. Though surrounded by hearsay and conjecture, it is still probable that Captain Samuel H. Walker of the Texas Rangers was one of the government agents and that he suggested features for the arm, which was subsequently named in his honor. The quantity would have been small, 300 or less, and no undisputed examples are in existence today (indeed, the reason Colt had to work from memory on the Whitneyville Walker was due to the fact that he had no pattern in 1847).

Nonetheless, that such a model existed we can accept as true. The fact that the guns were sent to Texas opens the further conjecture that individual weapons could have found their way into the hands of some dragoons in the early days of the Mexican War, albeit not through government issue.

The extreme scarcity of the Model 1847 today makes a collector's prize in the five-figure range, and the worth of an 1839 example, if it could be positively authenticated, defies speculation.

a.
b.
c.
d.



After the Mexican War, of a certainty, dragoons had pistols that were not issue. While escorting prisoners who threatened to get out of hand, Lowe reports that the non-com in charge, a Sergeant Cuddy, "ordered a halt, wheeled his horse so as to face them, loaded two pistols, placed one -- army size -- in his holster with flap thrown back ready for use, the other -- navy size (his private property) -- in his belt, and addressing them reviewed all of their misdeeds during the time he had known them."

On another occasion, after his promotion to sergeant, Lowe reports, "One night at 'Tattoo,' as I was calling the roll I heard the click of a pistol as if being cocked in front of me . . . [I] seized the man . . . and caught his right hand in his pocket holding a cocked pistol . . . the man claimed that he bought the pistol (Derringer) to shoot rats with."

An interesting aside on the subject of the dragoon's pistol is that official dispatches were carried in its barrel. Chamberlain records, "According to instructions I had placed my dispatches rolled up tight in the barrel of my holster pistol, in order that when all hope was gone the discharge of my pistol would effectually destroy them."

Blades

If the carbine characterized the dragoon, the saber was the arm of the cavalryman, that aristocrat of soldiers. Both Chamberlain and Lowe describe far more internal disputes which result in rough and tumble saber duels than with pistol shots, and Lowe says, "I took great pride in saber exercise, and practiced much with small swords made of tough hickory." An account of the Battle of Palo Alto captures the spirit of the dragoons: "In they went, the captain all flowing hair and mustachios. Sabers high, they made a hard ride from the wagon park down along the chaparall."

The first saber carried by the dragoons was the Model 1833 dragoon saber with a 3¼" quill-back blade, only

moderately curved, and a browned scabbard. By the Mexican War, the standard arm for both officers and enlisted men was the Model 1840 Heavy Cavalry Saber, popularly known as the "wrist breaker." It was 41½" long, with a pronounced curve to the blade. The hilt had a Phrygian helmet pattern pommel and half-basket guard in brass, and leather-covered wood grips wound with brass wire. The officer's version had decorated branches and pommel and etching on the blade. Ames Manufacturing Co. of Cabotville and later Chicopee, Massachusetts, made most of the enlisted swords and many of the officer's model, and the name can be found at the top of the blade. The scabbard of the 1840 saber was steel finish, with the officer's scabbard having brass mountings, and was fitted with two rings. The 1840 saber was in use through nearly the end of the 1850's. The enlisted type is plentiful and readily available to collectors today, while the officer's is rare.

In addition to the regulation saber, the dragoon must have virtually bristled with non-issue blades of various types and purposes. Most common was probably the ubiquitous bowie knife in one of its many forms. Chamberlain records carrying a bowie while off duty (as quoted above), and contemporary illustrations show the knives worn with the uniform, suspended from the sword belt on the right. (A drawing from a contemporary photograph, by the late Randy Steffen, shows three dragoons so armed post-1851. Steffen authored *The Horse Soldier*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press, Volume 2 of which covers the Mexican War period.)

In one of Chamberlain's exploits, also, he mentions "bleeding" his straining horse with "a small dirk." A pencil sketch accompanying this yarn shows a knife which appears to be a boot knife. And Lowe carried some kind of jack knife, offering "my four-bladed knife" as a present to an Indian.

The *Cavalry Tactics, 1841* under which the dragoons were trained, provided instruction for use of the lance, but there is no evidence of its actual use.

A colorful, larger-than-life mix of desperado and crack soldier, the United States Dragoon was the embodiment of the young and ebullient country that spawned him. His exploits and the tools of his trade are a fit subject for study by historian and collector alike.

"I came to the conclusion," says Chamberlain, "that the Dragoons were far superior in material to any other arm of the service. No man of any spirit and ambition would join the 'Doughboys' and go afoot, when he could ride a fine horse and wear spurs like a gentleman."

The author wishes to thank Andrew A. Young from whose fine collection the Hall-North Carbine, the Model 1847 Musketoon, and the Model 1840 Cavalry Saber (enlisted type) were photographed.

Opposite page:

Shown with a portrait of Lt. B. W. Armstrong, 1st Dragoons, c. 1845, are examples of swords issued to the dragoon regiments.

- Model 1833 officer's quill-back saber
- Blade detail of above, etched "United States Dragoons"
- Model 1840 officer's cavalry saber
- Model 1840 enlisted man's cavalry saber (the "wrist breaker")

(lower page) Contemporary lithograph capturing the spirit of the U.S. Dragoons at full charge, if not with complete accuracy. They are shown wearing the artist's conception of the dress uniform authorized in 1833, while dragoons serving in Mexico normally wore the undress uniform described in the text and shown on the cover.