

The Colt 1851 Navy Revolver

By

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It was a bitter and cold December day in Gallatin Missouri. Several young men in overcoats, tall leather boots, and large hats huddled together and entered the bank. The first man in the door had hard steely blue eyes, a confident and purposeful gait; he commanded attention from everyone in the room. The young man reached under his coat, pulled out a revolver, and cocked the hammer. "Cox!" he hissed, thinking he was talking to Samuel P. Cox, "caused the death of my brother Bill Anderson (Bloody Bill Anderson, a Missouri Partisan Ranger), and I am bound to have my revenge." He aimed directly at the clerk and squeezed the trigger. The thunderous bang echoed in the small room, flame and acrid smoke belching out of the muzzle. An instant later, the young man aimed squarely at the clerk's forehead and fired again. The unlucky clerk was John W. Sheets, a former Union Army Captain and the current cashier at the Daviess Count Savings Association in Gallatin, Missouri. The first shot hit Sheets in the heart, the second hit him squarely in the forehead. John W. Sheets was dead before he hit the ground.

Given John Sheets previous service to the Union during the Civil War, and his position at Daviess County Savings Association, a rumored Unionist institution, Jesse James probably did not lose any sleep over this case of mistaken identity. It is lost to history what revolver Jesse used that cold December day, but chances are it was a Colt 1851 Navy, a weapon which Jesse was very familiar with. During the Civil War, one of the most common pistols in use on both sides was the Colt Model 1851 "Navy" revolver. The 1851 was made in large numbers and widely available before the war. During the war it was even copied by the South. The 1851 was the first practical "belt gun" or revolver which could be carried in a belt holster.

Previous Colt Revolvers such as the massive Walker revolver and the slightly smaller Dragoon revolvers were meant to be carried in pommel holsters on the front of the saddle. Carried in this manner, the large size and weight of the Walker and Dragoon are not a problem, for a soldier mounted on a horse. However, the size and bulk was a problem for a soldier or civilian afoot. In addition, the 60 grain powder capacity of the Walker, and the 50 grain powder capacity of the Dragoon, and .44 caliber weren't deemed absolutely essential in a belt pistol, intended for close range use.

Up until the Model 1851, Colt's most successful revolver for the civilian market was the model 1849 Pocket revolver. Many of its successful characteristics were used in the design of the Model 1851, however its puny .31 caliber chambering, left a lot to be desired in stopping power. The diminutive size of the 1849 was best suited for concealed "pocket revolver" carried in a pocket or otherwise hidden.

The Model 1851 was in the larger .36 caliber (actually .375), the .36 was known as the Navy caliber. Hence the Model 1851 was also known popularly as the 1851 Navy. Ironically many more Model 1851s were used by the Army and on land than were ever used at sea. But the name 1851 Navy has become a part of legend.

During the Civil War, mounted cavalry or raiders, carried multiple revolver on their person and their horses, reportedly and many as eight. The nature of the cap and ball revolver like the Model 1851 Navy was while it could deliver six quick aimed shots, it was tedious to reload. Fighting on horseback or in a quick lighting raid precluded reloading the revolver. Even the practice of carrying spare loaded cylinders was a poor solution for reloading the revolver on horseback.

Frank and Jesse James carried and used the Model 1851 Navy during their raiding days with Quantrill and Anderson. It's probable they each carried several. Cavalrymen and raiders usually carried several revolvers as many as four to eight on their person and horse combined. Having six quick shot per revolver gave raiders a lot of close range firepower compared to dismounted troops with their slow and awkward single shot muzzle loading rifles.

Jesse would come to know the business end of the 1851 as well. The chest wound he suffered while attempting to surrender in 1865 was inflicted by .36 caliber ball (actually found during the 1995 exhumation of Jesse's grave). This .36 caliber ball was certainly fired from a Model 1851 Navy.