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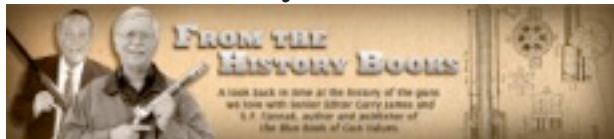
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## From the History Books



## King of Spain's Deluxe Winchester: The Story of a \$300,000 Rifle

by S.P. Fjestad | May 23, 2012



What started out as a gun evaluation with only a couple of blurry Polaroids from Spain finally came to fruition recently as John Allen (right) and myself proudly hold one of the finest Winchester lever actions ever manufactured. This deluxe engraved exhibition Model 1866 was personally given to the King of Spain by Oliver Winchester in 1870.

Every one of us in the firearms industry who gets involved daily in identifying and evaluating used guns from the owners on the other side of the counter, telephone, or computer has seen his/her share of average and mundane firearms over the years. It doesn't seem fair that [going through so much trash is rewarded with so little treasure!](#)

We keep hoping that some day we'll uncover a previously unknown Luger Carbine, engraved Winchester, or even a Colt Walker. Unfortunately, the reality is that for almost all of us this will never happen, especially with so many auction companies around scooping up the creme de la crème before we ever hear about it.

So when John Allen and myself first saw some mostly blurry small Polaroid pictures of what was supposed to be a deluxe engraved [Model 1866 Winchester](#) several years ago, we were very skeptical. Yet there was one photo that stood out in my mind. It was an angled shot taken from the back of the rifle showing the stock and the

frame. What captured my attention was the color of the engraved gold washed receiver, which looked original, as did the stock varnish. More importantly, why would anybody try to get us to authenticate a Deluxe Winchester rifle like this by sending in a bunch of blurry Polaroids? Normally, it's the other way around – the people who want their fakes authenticated give us the best images.

I told John to send the Polaroids and contact info of the owner in Spain to LeRoy Merz of Merz Antiques, a long-time Winchester dealer with a lifetime of experience on New Haven's finest. He proceeded to contact the family and began negotiations with the great-great grandson of the former King of Spain. The family history of this rifle indicated it was presented personally to King Alfonso XII by Oliver Winchester. It took a while to get the family to commit, but one thing they were firm on was that Mr. Merz would have to fly to Spain to purchase and physically pick up the guns as there were others besides the Deluxe 1866.

Mr. Merz arranged the date he'd arrive, purchased a one-way ticket from Minneapolis to Barcelona, and a return trip from Amsterdam back to Minnesota. Upon arriving in Barcelona, the family picked him up and Mr. Merz was driven to an older, well-maintained estate where he was quickly shown the firearms. Mr. Merz verified the originality of this deluxe Model 1866, and also purchased two other firearms from this direct descendant of the King of Spain, one being a Winchester Model 1873, ser. no. 13, (which was sold through the Julia Auction Company recently) and a Colt Lightning Magazine rifle.

The King of Spain's exhibition quality Winchester was spectacular – perhaps the finest ever made. It is almost without question that this rifle was created for a special presentation, and given the elaborate and extensive engraving coverage it certainly is of the quality one would expect for a royalty presentation.

[\[Show as slideshow\]](#)





Now Mr. Merz had to get the three guns back to the U.S. – no easy task since Europe has many gun restrictions. Striking up a conversation at a local bar with a Spanish cab driver, Mr. Merz decided to get a ride to Paris in the cabby's compact European taxi cab. Sometime after leaving Barcelona, the cab passed by a local *policia* car going the other direction. When it turned around and started following them, the cab driver became very nervous and started speeding. Coming to an intersection at a very high rate of

speed, the cab driver ran a red light and T-boned a larger sedan with disastrous results. Seeing the accident coming, Mr. Merz got down on the floor right before the crash, which probably saved his life. The violent impact slammed him into the bottom of both front seats, but outside of a shoulder separation and mild concussion, he was OK.

Crawling back up on the rear seat and noticing his bloody and unconscious driver slumped over the collapsed steering wheel, the situation looked very grim. The taxi had impacted the larger sedan so hard, it had gone half way through it, probably killing both occupants instantly. Mr. Merz then quickly made his most important decision while visiting Spain in the middle of a concussion.

He crawled out the broken rear window, and since the force of the impact had sprung the trunk open, he grabbed his suitcase with guns inside and disappeared into the gathering crowd before the Federales arrived. Jumping into another cab a short time later, he was uneventfully driven to Paris. Convalescing overnight, the next day he took a train to Amsterdam, and upon arriving at a hotel close to the Schiphol Airport, he filled the bathtub up with ice to help the throbbing pain in his dislocated shoulder.

The next day he went to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam and checked his large suitcase with precious artifacts at the oversize baggage counter. Going through his gate thinking the worst should now be behind him, the overhead intercom crackled, "Would Mr. Merz please return to the counter?" Taking a long walk back past security, and proceeding to the counter, the agents advised him he had not filled out the "unloaded guns" paperwork. The agents were cordial but firm and Mr. Merz proceeded to fill out the necessary paperwork. Rushing back to the gate, he was one of the last people to board the Airbus back to Minneapolis.

Once on the plane, he now thought that most of his problems were finally behind him and quickly dozed off. Arriving in Minneapolis, he waited for his oversized suitcase to show up. It didn't, because it

missed the flight from Amsterdam. Upon entering into the U.S. customs area, a very tired, still in pain, and exhausted Mr. Merz got to the counter where he quickly received the fifth degree from the customs officials. Since his precious cargo hadn't arrived yet, he now had to spend another half a day hanging around the airport worrying about where his guns were, and if they would show up on the next flight. Fortunately, they did and three or four customs agents examined everything with a fine tooth comb before this Federal Firearms Licensed dealer was finally allowed to leave the Lindberg Terminal with his oversized suitcase, contents included. By the time he drove the three hours back to Fergus Falls, Mr. Merz was totally worn out and went to a doctor the following day to get treatment for his dislocated shoulder. However, it took quite a while for him to get back to normal.

So is there a happy ending to this story after all this drama? Fortunately, yes. Once the rifles were professionally cleaned and stocks reattached to the frames, Mr. Merz contacted Mr. Wes Adams, an advanced Winchester collector who had already amassed a large gun collection. After Mr. Adams agreed to pay Mr. Merz's asking price that was under the halfway point on six digits, the King of Spain's Deluxe Model 1866 was carefully packed and shipped to its new owner.

Unfortunately, Mr. Adams passed away late last year, and most of his collection was auctioned off by James D. Julia, Inc. auctions March 12-13. On this behalf, I was fortunate to have Mr. J.R. LaRue from the Julia auction house give me a guided tour of some of Mr. Adams' finer specimens in a special pre-auction viewing room during the recent Antique Arms Show in Las Vegas. John Allen and I had our pictures taken with this most famous Model 1866 Winchester, which was the highlight of our trip.

So what's it worth now, going through an auction house after the previous owner had owned it for less than two years? Mr. LaRue indicated he thought this rifle would sell in the \$250,000 – \$325,000 range in their upcoming auction. He was right – the gun

brought just north of \$300K including the auction premium, and guess who the buyer was? None other than Mr. Merz, again!

The saga and recovery of the King of Spain's Winchester had now come full circle. Starting out with a few bad Polaroids, the gun had finally made its way back to America after almost 140 years. Even though Mr. Merz almost lost his life bringing this national treasure back, this gun and its first American owner are once again reunited, and a tight bond has obviously been established. Sometimes, truth is stranger than fiction.



Every gun's unique desirability factor takes into consideration six key factors. They include: 1 -Major trademark/mmanufacturer recognition, significance and importance, 2 - Original condition, 3 -Special orders/features, embellishments, accessories, and accoutrements, 4-Historical recognition and/or famous provenance, 5 -Rarity, 6 -Eye appeal. This Deluxe Model 1866 Winchester scores very high in every one of these key desirability factors, and that's why the price tag on such an über gun can go well into the six digits.

*Images courtesy of James D. Julia, Inc. and S.P. Fjestad. Winchester description courtesy of J.R. LaRue, from James D. Julia, and LeRoy Merz. Historical provenance of King Alfonso XII, courtesy Wikipedia. Story courtesy of Mr. LeRoy Merz of Merz Antiques with assistance from Mr. John Allen of Blue Book Publications, Inc.*