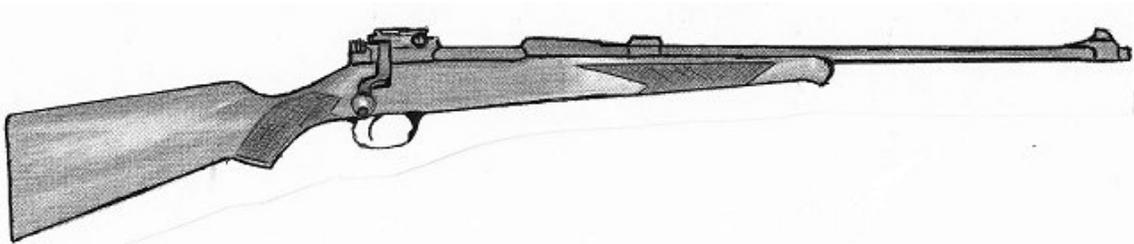


THE WINCHESTER MODEL 51 “IMPERIAL” SPORTING RIFLE

*By Marc Gorelick
Virginia Gun Collectors Association*

One of the least known of Winchester rifles is the Model 51 “Imperial” bolt action magazine rifle. Only 24 of this high-grade firearm were manufactured before a shortsighted Board of Directors killed the project.

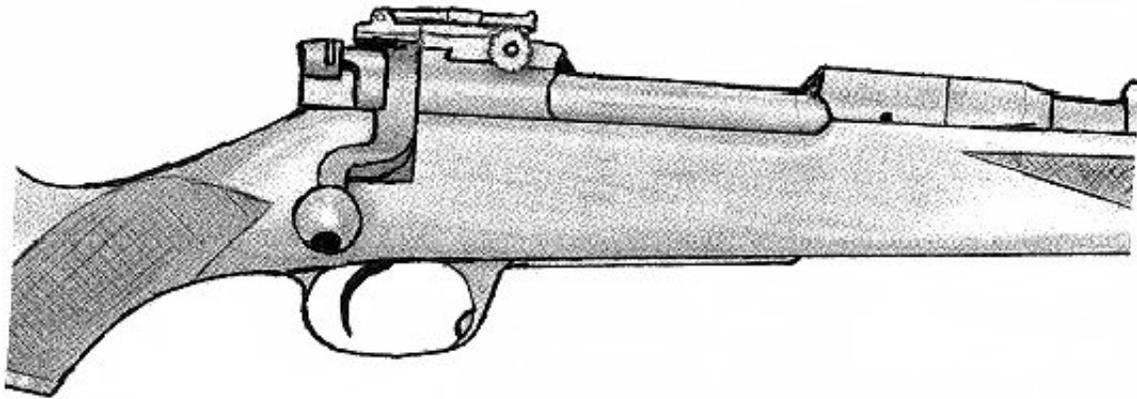
Despite its contracts for Britain, the United States and other governments during World War 1 the Winchester Repeating Arms Company managed to produce sporting arms for the domestic and foreign markets. Winchester also knew that government contracts for military weapons would dry up when the war ended. The company management encouraged its designers to develop new arms for the post war civilian market.



Drawing of Winchester Model 51 Imperial Rifle by the author

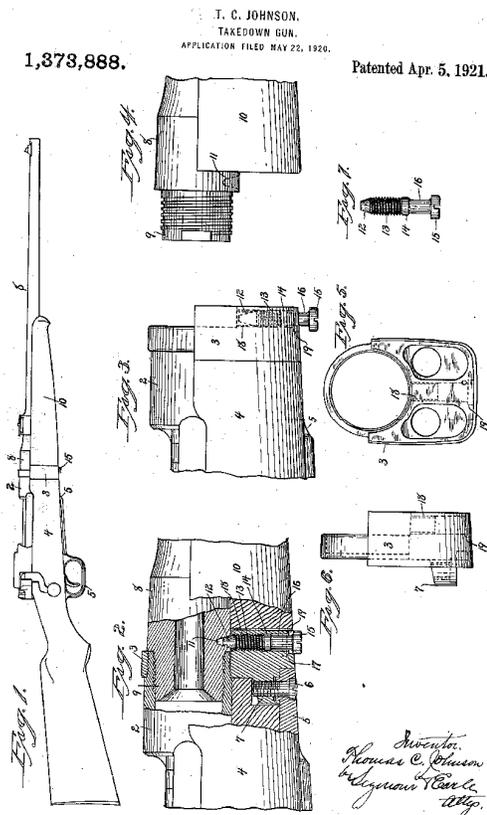
In June 1918 Thomas C. Johnson, one of Winchester’s leading designers, developed the Model E, eventually to be designated the Winchester Model 51 “Imperial” Sporting Rifle, from the Model D Bolt Action Magazine Rifle. Produced in both solid frame and takedown versions, the Model 51 “Imperial” was designed to be a top-quality rifle for the high-end wealthy trade. In appearance it closely followed high grade English and German bolt action express sporting rifles. In fact, Winchester decided to give it the name “Imperial” as well as the traditional Winchester model number in September 1918 in order to emphasize its quality and separate it from the company’s standard production rifles.

The Model 51’s receiver was basically a slightly modified Model D receiver, which was, in turn, a modified P-14 receiver. It had many characteristics of the P-14 and M1917 and many of its parts were made on machinery and tools that made the P-14 and M1917. Johnson lengthened the triggerguard and gave it a straight obliquely angled front that contained a magazine floor plate release. He also redesigned the stock in front of the triggerguard, giving it a straight profile by eliminating the typical M1917 step in front of the magazine floor plate. The entire unit was now flush with the bottom of the stock. The Model 51 had a reconfigured buttstock with a full pistol grip, a single trigger (Johnson’s earlier designs had double set triggers), a long wide forearm with a schnabel forend, and a plain tapered barrel. The high-grade walnut stock had fine checkering at the wrist and forend. In keeping with its intended market, all the Model 51’s steel parts were highly polished before bluing.

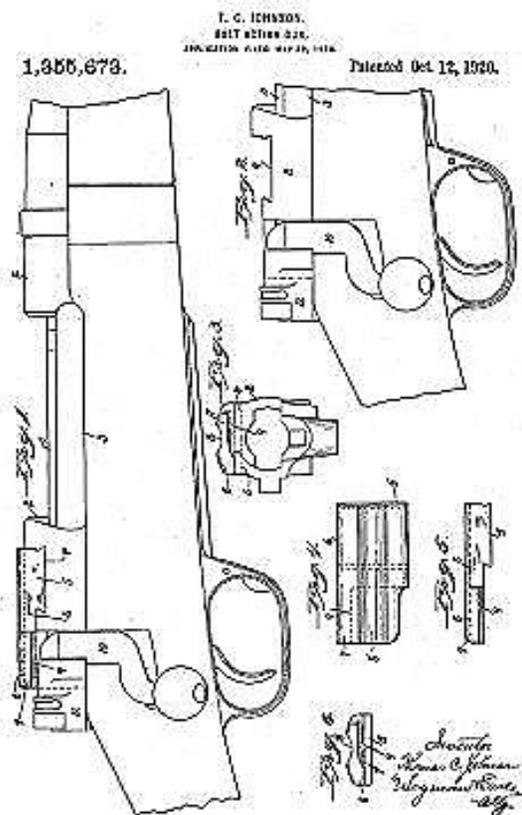


Drawing of Winchester Model 51 Imperial bolt, action and sight by the author.

Although the rifle had a folding leaf express rear sight on the barrel, it could also be fitted with a telescopic sight or an adjustable peep sight fitted on bridge of the rear receiver. The front of the receiver was drilled and tapped for a telescopic sight mount. The rear receiver consisted of a sight mortise that could be filled by either a special grooved blank (for mounting a telescopic sight), or a vernier windage and range adjustable peep sight that Johnson had designed for an earlier rifle. He also designed and patented the takedown mechanism that was used on the Model 51.



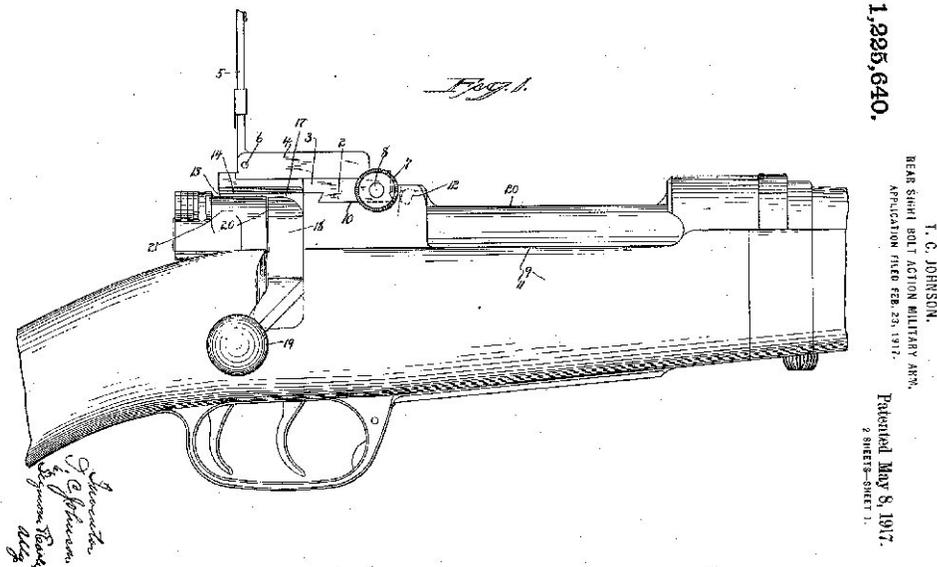
Johnson Patent 1,373,888 April 5, 1921
Takedown mechanism for Model 51



Johnson Patent 1,355,673 Oct. 12, 1920
Grooved rear sight blank for Model 51

Source: US Patent Office

The Model 51 Imperial had an overall length of 42 ½” with a 22” long barrel. It was made in only .30-06, .35 Newton, and the new Winchester developed .27 (or .270) cartridge, which had a muzzle velocity in excess of 3,000 feet per second.



Johnson Patent 1,225,640 May 8, 1917 Sheet One. Rear sight for the Model C but also used on the Model E or Model 51. Source: US Patent Office.

In June 1919, Winchester management assigned production of the Model 51, both in its takedown and sold frame versions, to the company's newly established Gunsmith Shop since the company thought that orders would not exceed 200 rifles a year. The Gunsmith Shop would operate in the same manner as a custom shop that could build rifles that matched the quality of hand crafted European arms. It was supposed to be able to manufacture guns at a lower unit cost than its competitors in the U.S. and abroad because of its proximity to the Winchester factory. Examination of the Model 51 Imperials that were made in the Gunsmith Shop reveals that they were hand-finished.

Winchester produced only 24 Model 51s, four pre-production rifles in the Model Shop and 20 in the Gunsmith Shop. Although it was a handsome, well designed and well crafted quality firearm that was targeted at an affluent market, there was a group within the Winchester leadership that did not support the manufacture and marketing of bolt action sporting rifles in general and the Model 51 in particular. One influential Winchester Vice-President, Frank G. Drew, a proponent of lever actions and leader of this group, voiced the opinion that bolt action sporting rifles were "frivolous toys" and "unsaleable," and that further production of the Model 51 would be "folly." Drew and his group had their way; the Winchester Board of the Directors reversed its earlier support and cancelled the Model 51 project in February 1920.

Drew became President of Winchester in June 1924 and realized his mistake about the viability of bolt action sporting rifles after Remington came out with the Model 30 in 1921. The Model 30, a derivative of the Model of 1917, had strong sales and established Remington as the pre-eminent U.S. maker of bolt action sporting rifles. Drew's answer to the Remington Model 30 was to order the development of the Model F, which was eventually put into production as the economically produced Winchester

Model 54. Winchester manufactured both the Model 54 and .22 caliber Model 52 on tools and equipment originally used to produce the P-14 and M1917, which Winchester acquired from the U.S. Government in 1919.

The Model 51 "Imperial" was dead. However, after the Olin family acquired a bankrupt Winchester in December 1931 and John Olin became president of the firm, the Model 51 would be reborn when its descendent, the Model 70, was introduced in 1936.