ST LOUIS BOUND!

STEVE FISCHER VISITS BROWNING ARMS COMPANY

One of the most enjoyable aspects of being a part of the fascinating world of firearms is the occasional opportunity it affords me to visit a manufacturer's facility. As a gunsmith in my 'real life', these types of trips are of particular interest as I get to see how the big guys do it, up close and personal. I am always hopeful of learning a new trick or two – such as how the factory guys get that "@#$&%*" pin into the franistan lever without growing an extra hand or breaking a nail! You get the idea.

I was really pumped up about this road trip, because it was to be my first visit to Browning Arms Company – not the Morgan, Utah facility, but the one located just outside of St. Louis in Arnold, Missouri, where repairs are done.

But before I begin, here's some background for you. Browning Arms Co. was established in 1927 in Morgan, Utah. This location still remains the home base of offices for Browning in the US and is also home to Browning's fabulous firearms museum. Other Browning locations include Canada and, of course, Belgium.

Some of the most famous and reliable firearms were born in the creative mind of John Moses Browning, such as the holy grail of auto pistols, the Model 1911 .45 caliber semi-automatic and the Browning Model 1895 "Peacemaker" .30 caliber machine gun. Browning brought forth several machine guns including the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) chambered in 30-06 which saw duty in both World Wars, and the biggie – a 50 caliber machine gun.

From 1883 to 1902 Browning worked with Winchester Arms, designing some of the most reliable, innovative and sought after firearms of the time. Revered today by collectors, Browning's design of the 1886 Winchester lever action rifle commands record prices in today's collector market. His model 1894 lever action rifle, besides bringing fame and fortune to Winchester Arms, certainly earned its place in history (along with the 1873 colt revolver) as one of the guns that "won the west".

Browning's tremendous ingenuity in firearms design was not limited to rifles and pistols, but sparked the beginning of the pump action shotguns with the Model 1897, again, marketed by Winchester. One of his most famous of shotgun designs, not produced by Winchester, was the A-5 semi-auto shotgun. To this day it is cherished by sportsmen and hunters. There are many who own the A-5 "Sweet 16" that would never think of parting with or selling this favorite bird gun, choosing instead to pass it down from father to son for generations.

A personal favorite of mine, the "Superposed", was Browning's superb design for an over/under shotgun. Built in a multitude of configurations, gauges and grades from 12 gauge down to .410, it is a superbly balanced and smooth handling shotgun, prized by shooters and collectors alike. Without doubt, John Moses Browning was one of the most talented and prolific firearms designers with 128 gun related patents in his name. Many of his designs, although around or over 100 years old, continue to be produced today and are considered by many to be as good as it gets.

The Herstal Belgian company Fabrique Nationale, usually abbreviated to "FN", is the owner of Browning Arms and also owns the U.S. Repeating Arms Co. (Winchester). FN produces both military and sporting rifles and handguns, while the Citori over/under shotguns in Browning's present day line-up are produced by Miroku, located in Nangoku Kochi Prefecture, Japan.

The Browning's Company also markets an extensive line of other products including clothing, gun cases, safes, cleaning gear and hearing protection, fishing related items – and many other products, far to numerous to mention. John Moses Browning passed away in 1926 at the age of 71 and were he alive today, I am sure he would be proud of the progress and success of his namesake company.

ON SITE

As is often the case, the 'mind's eye' vision of how a place or a person should look is completely different in real life. Such was the case when I pulled into the Browning parking lot. I had expected to see a huge complex of several tall buildings, high fences, with armed patrols roaming the perimeter 24-7. What I found was an unassuming building, deceptively

THE FRONT ENTRANCE OF THE BROWNING OFFICES AND WAREHOUSE.

large and sprawling, with a nicely manicured lawn, tasteful flower beds and a façade of mid-west style brickwork. Had it not been for the name 'Browning' displayed on the building, it could have been just about any small business factory, nicely tucked away in a small industrial park, anywhere in the country. This was not to say that there was no security, because there was plenty – but unobtrusive.

My tour guide for the day was John Slack, the gun shop manager. As always, nothing beats getting information from the source – and John was most helpful and forthcoming. One question in particular which most Browning firearm owners want to know is, "*How long will the factory have my gun when I send it in for repair?*" The average repair takes approximately four to six weeks from receiving to return. It seems a long time, but then this facility is handling some 1,000 gun repairs each month – that's over 30 repairs a day! In addition, they also handle the repairs or returns of just about all the products in the Browning line – including the non-firearms items such as clothing, knives, cases, hats, archery equipment, as well as the repair service for the Winchester line of firearms produced and sold under a licensing agreement between the two companies.

The Arnold plant has a staff of 18 gunsmiths, three refinishing specialists and 5 engravers. Together with John Slack and Lead Gunsmith, Rob Semonis, they handle the awesome volume of repairs that come through the door on a daily basis. I was also informed that there are about 65 additional repair facilities located around the U.S. that handle many of the smaller and quicker repairs. Major problems and refinishing of both wood and metal come to the Arnold location.

Each and every gun that comes in for repair is thoroughly tested by live fire before it is returned to the customer. Over a million rounds of ammo ranging from .22 to .458 Magnum, and all the shotgun gauges, are shot during testing. Their test fire range is long enough to verify accuracy and function of rifles and pistols, as well as pattern and point of impact testing for shotguns.

START AT THE BEGINNING

Before a single screw is turned, or a test shell fired, the day's arrivals for repair must first get logged in and assigned an inventory number that will stay with the firearm throughout its stay. This enables the firearm to be tracked and easily found at any point in its journey through the plant until it is completed, packaged and ready for return to the customer.

As we walked around the shop it was easy to see that the work load tempo was fairly high. Multiple milling machines and lathes were in evidence and just about any repair or modification can be done to any Browning firearm with the multitude of equipment on hand. A special room contained the hot degreasing, bluing and boil out tanks, as well as the plating tanks, for the small parts like the gold triggers found on many of the Browning shotguns.

Restoring the surfaces of the metal parts of a firearm to original condition is done by hand. First, the gun must be totally disassembled and the parts not needing refinishing separated from the rest. Then, these parts (such as the barrel, receiver, and forend iron, for example) are carefully polished to remove any damage, scratches, or rust – right down to bare metal. Most of the polishing work is still done by hand with files and hand polishing to keep those corners, edges, and lettering sharp and crisp – only moving on to buffing wheels for a final higher luster polish before heading into the bluing tanks. The brightness, quality, and luster of the finished job is directly related to the quality of the polishing process and the practiced skills of the technicians, as the bluing chemicals only color the metal. After completing the polishing process, the parts are boiled in a degreasing solution to remove any dirt, oil or grease from their surfaces. The parts are then quenched in cool water and rinsed before being submerged into the actual bluing tank where they are boiled for 15 or 20 minutes at a temperature approaching 300 degrees Fahrenheit. The progress of the coloring of the metal is checked visually until it is uniform and complete. The parts are then boiled in clear, clean water for an additional 15 to 20 minutes to stop the action of the bluing chemicals on the metal. The parts are then quickly oiled and allowed time to cool before they are re-assembled. As we walked through the bluing

AS YOU CAN SEE, THE VOLUME OF REPAIRS OF ALL KINDS RECEIVED DAILY IS ENORMOUS!

EACH GUNSMITH HAS HIS OWN BENCH AND WORK AREA WHILE THE BIG MACHINERY SUCH AS THE MILLS AND LATHES ARE SHARED.

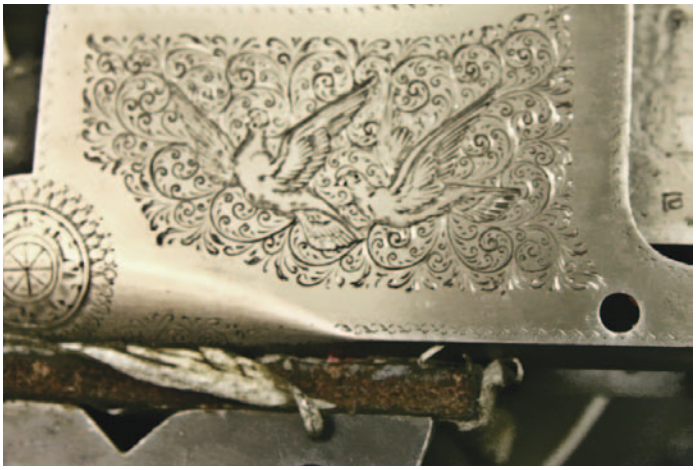
area a question came to mind regarding the gray color on the receivers of many of the Citori over/under shotguns. I wanted to know just what made that color of finish on the receiver and forend iron. John explained that it was a process called Nitrite – very similar in application to color case hardening. The process greatly hardens the surface of the parts treated and gives them that stainless steel appearance. This process, he told me, was outsourced when refinishing was required.

STOCK WORK

Next was the stock finish drying room with its fans and space heaters to help speed up the drying process of fresh finish on the stocks that were in progress. The various finishes of Browning guns can be faithfully duplicated. As in bluing, the refinishing of the wood is a labor-intensive job while the gunsmith must have a real talent for working with wood in order to keep the proper shape and lines of the stock and forend – as well as applying the finish smoothly without runs. The final steps of the refinishing process are to re-cut all or part of the checkering to make the refinished parts look like new.

Next was the warehouse area from where just about everything Browning is shipped to authorized dealers and others who offer Browning products for sale – both retail and wholesale.

In that same area is a product testing department that ensures all products are up to snuff and of best quality. For example, they might take a waterproof gun case and submerge it in a tank of water for say two or three days – just to see if it stays dry inside. They might submit items from the clothing line to multiple washings to see if the color holds or if the fabric



deteriorates. These folks in the testing department take their job very seriously – ensuring that Browning products are of the best quality.

Most interesting was to watch one of the in-house engravers. Richard Hambrook was working on a Superposed Belgian made over/under receiver, engraving the 'Pigeon Grade' pattern. A pneumatically operated engraving tool supplied the 'hammering' effect to cut the delicate pattern into the metal as he skillfully guided its cutting edge just the right amount of depth into the metal, while his other hand turned the round ball vice, capable of moving in all directions, guiding the metal into the cutting edge of the tool. A high powered microscope allowed him to see every detail of the cuts made onto the receiver. Custom engraving, as well as restoration work on guns in for refinishing, is done on a daily basis by these talented artists. I have always marveled at the skills of engravers as they must apply their talents of scroll work, gold inlays and animal images in exacting detail, well balanced on both sides – and do it in steel!

Our last stop was the shipping department, where the repaired items are ready for return to their owners. The tracking code for the firearm is once again verified and the item is carefully packaged and sealed. Great care is taken to ensure the returned firearm arrives safely to its final destination.

This would be a good point to remind anyone who is sending their firearm to the factory for repair to be sure and pack it properly so that it doesn't get further damaged while in transit. If you don't have the original box that your gun came in, carefully wrap it in bubble wrap and pad it well inside another cardboard container with adequate space for additional cushioning material such as Styrofoam 'peanuts', more bubble wrap, or balled-up newspaper. Another option that works very well if you don't have the original box, is to buy an inexpensive plastic gun case with foam lining at places like Cabela's, Gander Mountain or Bass Pro Shops. They make for excellent protection for your gun. The gun can be returned in the same case, and the likelihood of damage through the shipping process is greatly reduced. I recommend insurance as well.

Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed the tour and met some very nice folks who make it their business to provide excellent service, as fast as possible, to the many owners of Browning firearms and products. A special thanks to John Slack and JJ Hamblen for allowing me to interrupt their busy day and for giving me the opportunity to provide our readers with some real insight to the repair process at Browning. You know, I bet a trip to Morgan, Utah and Browning's fabulous museum would make for a great story! Hmmmm… ■

If you need service or repair on your Browning product or firearm, all pertinent information can be found on their web site at www.Browning.com. or just call them at 1-800-322-4626.

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