

SECOND-HAND AUTO LOADERS...

STEVE FISCHER TELLS YOU WHAT TO LOOK FOR!



For someone like me who has had a love affair with firearms ever since I was a kid – and Michigan Outdoors was a regular on my family's 12 inch Motorola black and white TV – the best day of the year was October 20th (when the pheasant season began) and the smell of just fired shotgun shells was better than perfume. I suppose being a gunsmith was an appropriate if not shoo-in choice for an occupation! Now, with about 30 years of it under my belt, sharing a little knowledge and information about the trade seems like a good idea. After all, this isn't like being a magician where you swear to never reveal any secrets of the trade for fear of being banished to Transylvania! So, for all of those shooters out there whose guns come from the 'pre-owned' area of the local gun shop, this one's for you!

THE REMINGTON 1100 AND 11-87

This is as good a place as any to start with the 'how to' part of choosing a used auto-loader as there are a good many of these guns on the market – probably in the millions by now. The 1100 has an enviable reputation and has been found in the winner's circle for many years now – and the 11-87 is very similar with most of the parts interchangeable. Their owners have put many scores in the record books from trap, skeet, sporting, as well as the flyers ring and they have certainly been responsible for countless fond memories and thousands of trips to the hunting fields.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR FIRST

There are a couple of tools you should take along when hunting

down a good used auto. A tape measure, a pin punch, a pair of needle nose pliers and a small flashlight will be useful. You can use them to measure the barrel length, check inside the barrel and action with the light, and if permitted, use the punch and pliers to remove the trigger housing and other parts for a look at the inside of the receiver.

A good place to start examining the prospective purchase of any gun is with a close check of the overall outward appearance. This would apply to any brand or type of gun for that matter, and is a good clue as to how the gun has been treated by its previous owner. Is the stock and forearm wood in reasonably good condition? Are there any easily identifiable cracks in either piece? Is the wood worn and full of dents and scratches in the finish? How about the condition of the bluing? Is there

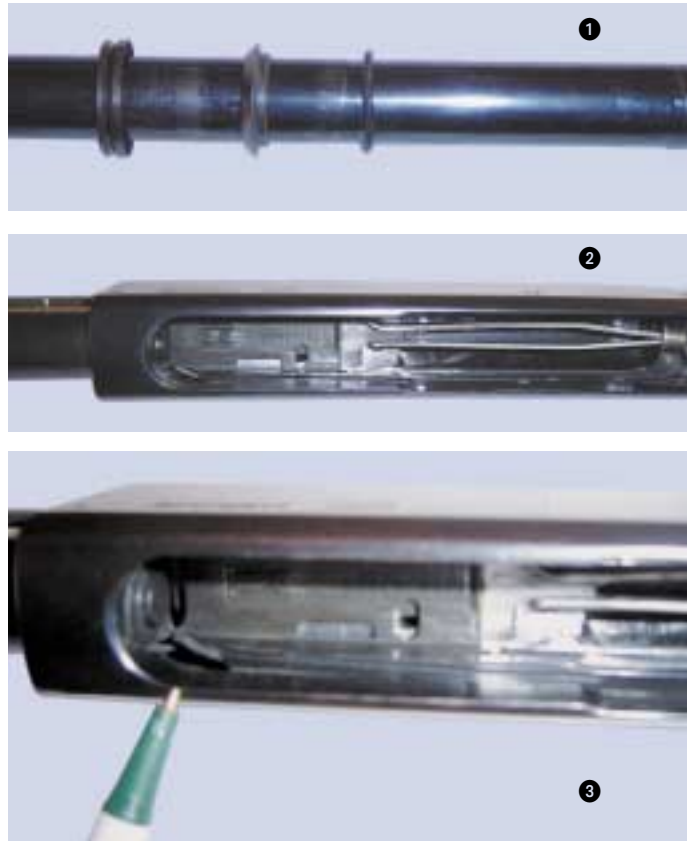
any visible rust on the metal parts? Has the gun been re-blued? (This can be a negotiating point on the price). Also, don't be afraid to ask if the gun has been modified in any way. Are there any dings, dents, bulges, or obvious evidence that the barrel has been cut or damaged? A 'yes' answer to one or more of these questions doesn't necessarily mean an automatic 'no' for a purchase, but depends on your needs and requirements as to the beauty vs. function issue and can be a negotiating point over the final price of the gun. However, some dings and dents are more important than others. Those found in the wood can often be repaired or removed by refinishing and are less critical than those in the metal works. In fact, any ding in a barrel that is big enough to be visible when looking through the bore, should not be considered for a purchase. The metal may be too

stressed at the dent and is a possible safety hazard to be avoided. Spare new and used barrels are readily available for this model. Otherwise, dents in the rib can be straightened and minor scratches in the finish of the metal can be re-blued. There are several versions of the 11-87 model that have light contoured barrels. These barrels must not be modified for long forcing cones and there is a roll stamped legend on the side of the barrel to that affect.

A CLOSER LOOK INSIDE

Here's an easy way to get a peek at the insides if you don't know how to disassemble the 1100 Remington or any of the other autos we will look at. Ask to be shown how to disassemble the gun for cleaning. Having a closer look at the mechanism is being a smart buyer, and if the seller is reluctant to allow any disassembly of the gun I would suggest that you look elsewhere for that 'new' used auto. I too often see the results of buying a pig in a poke when a used gun purchase ends up in my shop because it was missing parts or something was broken.

Now, the first part of the disassembly process of the Remington 1100 is to remove the barrel from the receiver. Simple enough. With the bolt in the open position, just unscrew the magazine cap and pull the barrel out of the receiver along with the forearm wood and then slip the forearm off the barrel. Now you will be able to look through the bore and also inside the barrel extension where the gas ports are located. If the inside of the gas port extension is funky and dirty, it will tell you that the previous owner probably didn't spend much time cleaning. Next, take a look at the other half of the gun, the receiver



- 1 PROPER POSITIONING OF PISTON, PISTON SEAL AND RUBBER 'O' RING ON AN 1100 REMINGTON.
- 2 SHOWING THE LINK IN ITS PROPER POSITION IN THE RECEIVER. (1100)
- 3 POINTER SHOWING FRONT OF FEED LATCH, WHICH MUST BE DEPRESSED TO REMOVE BOLT AND ACTION BAR ASSEMBLY. THIS APPLIES TO BOTH THE 1100 AND THE 11-87, ALTHOUGH THE 11-87 PARTS MAY LOOK SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT.

and magazine tube. There should be three parts on this tube, just in front of the action tube. A rubber 'O' ring and two metal rings called the piston and piston seal. How these parts are assembled onto the mag tube affects the function of the gun. The 'O' ring should come off the mag tube first, followed by the two piston rings. The first metal ring is the piston seal and should have the beveled bottom pointing toward the receiver. It fits into the thicker metal of the part just beneath it, called the piston, which has its bevel facing away from the receiver. If any of these parts are missing or assembled out of order, the gun will not function properly. Check these parts for

damage – especially the rubber 'O' ring. If you find damage or missing pieces, these parts can easily be replaced and are not too terribly expensive.

INSIDE THE RECEIVER

The next area of the gun to be examined is the trigger housing assembly and the inside of the receiver. The entire trigger unit is held in place by two cross pins and comes out in one piece. Simply push out the large cross pin at the rear of the trigger and the smaller front pin, located about 3 inches forward of the larger rear pin. With a little maneuvering the trigger housing can be pulled out from the

bottom of the receiver. Inside the receiver and in the trigger assembly is where the majority of the story on the gun's life can be found. First off, look at the face of the hammer. If it is badly dented, showing a rather deep recess in its face where it strikes the firing pin, the gun in question has been shot quite a lot. Take a good look at the carrier (the part that lifts the shell to the chamber) for any signs of cracking where it attaches to the trigger housing body. Excessive wear on any of the trigger assembly parts are usually pretty evident. Again, this part is replaceable as a unit – or piece by piece if necessary. In order to get a good look at the receiver's insides, the action bar assembly, which carries the bolt upon it, must be removed. This too is a simple operation once you get the feel of it. First, the operating handle must be removed from the bolt by just pulling it outward. It is only held in by a spring loaded detent. The feed latch is staked in place along the inside of the receiver on the right hand side. It must be depressed (inwards toward the receiver wall) and held down while you slide the action bar assembly and the bolt body out through the front of the receiver where you can then lift the bolt body off its seat on the action bar. Depressing the feed latch is also required when reassembling the action bar and bolt back into the receiver.

Still inside the receiver is the link, a "T" shaped part with two thin legs that looks something like a tuning fork and is seated in the recoil spring follower. This part can be easily picked out of the receiver with your fingers, but you will need the needle nose pliers to get it back in its proper place without skinned knuckles and curse words in three languages! The two tails on the unit must be compressed together in order to

get them to fit inside a recess on the front of the recoil spring follower.

With all of the above parts out of the receiver, you can now take a look inside and check for evidence of wear and how much use the gun has seen. If the rails along both sides of the receiver are worn sharp (check this very carefully, as the rails can get as sharp as a razor!) the gun has seen considerable use. Also check deep inside on the bottom, where the bolt travels, for deep dents caused by the bolts locking block, and hammering of the recess where the bolts locking block hits the locking recess shoulder.

Check out the bolt body to see if the extractor is in place and not too beat up and that the firing pin (easily seen from the bottom side of the bolt body) is not broken or damaged. Also check that the return spring on the firing pin is not damaged or broken. After close scrutiny of the parts and the receiver and barrel you will have a pretty good idea of the wear, care and maintenance or the lack thereof. Don't be afraid to barter on the price of a used auto! You will usually find sellers willing to move off their initial asking price if you ask them correctly. Be polite, but point out the flaws and ask if they would consider an offer or take a reduction in the asking price. Thank the seller for the help and instruction in the disassembly – and watch carefully how it is re-assembled – as you may be the next proud owner!

Now you have an idea of what to look out for when buying a used Remington 1100, or 11-87, and much of the same things to look out for apply to the other auto loaders I will cover. The Remingtons are exceptional in that the two models have all steel receivers, where the next models to be covered, all have aluminum receivers.

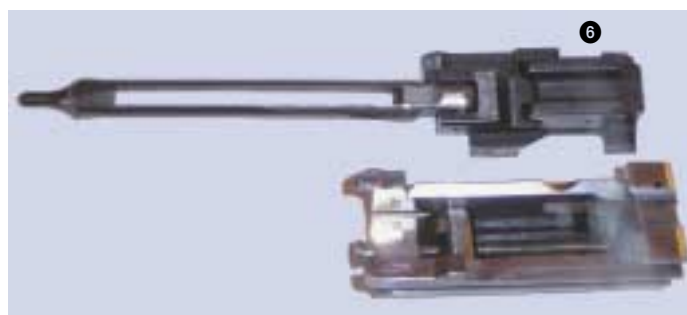
THE BERETTA 390 AND 391

There are many similarities in the disassembly procedure of most autoloaders. Like the 1100 and the 11-87, the start of the disassembly begins with the removal of the magazine cap and sliding off the forearm wood and the barrel. Slide the forearm off the barrel and use the same criteria for inspection on

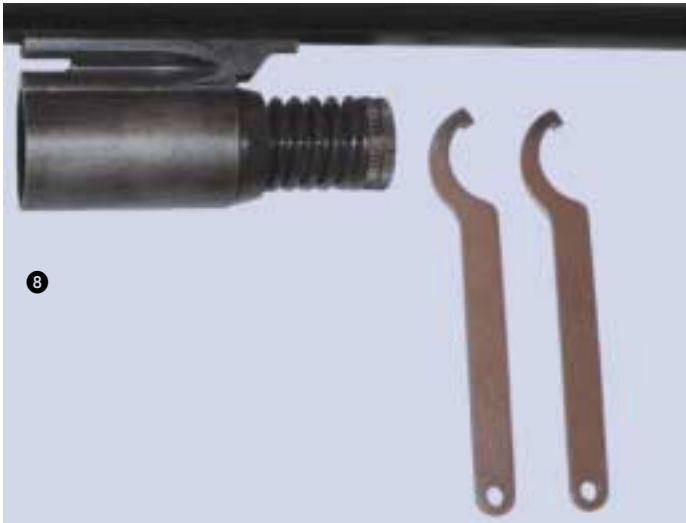
these Berettas as described for the Remington 1100 models – except that you can also remove the spring and gas piston just before removing the barrel on the Beretta 390 model. The 391 is slightly different and has the gas piston assembled under the barrel. On both the 390 and the 391, the trigger housing assembly is held in place by one cross pin that is

located in the side of the receiver close to the front end of the trigger guard. Both the 390 and the 391 are identical in this regard. They are usually both a bit stubborn to get out, which requires that you push the trigger guard assembly towards the magazine tube in order to get the stub on the rear of the trigger guard out of its pocket in the rear of the receiver. Remove the operating handle from the bolt by pulling it outward. Once this is accomplished, the gas piston, action tube and bolt can be removed merely by pulling the action tube off the magazine tube. The bolt will come out with the action tube. The connecting rod, similar to the 1100's 'link', comes out as part of the bolt assembly. It is usually not necessary to disassemble this part – just check it for any signs of a crack. The bolt is a two piece assembly and when the two parts are separated, the firing pin and its return spring are visible. Check these parts for breakage or excessive wear, paying special attention to the firing pin return spring.

The Beretta trigger assembly has a weak spot in the right and left hammer struts. These will break on occasion, and it is usually a good idea to have a spare set should you buy either of the two models. The locking block, located in the top section of the bolt should be checked for any signs of cracking and excessive wear on the edge of the block that locks into the mating section of the barrel extension. Check the gas piston for cracks as well. Chances are the recoil spring has never been changed by the previous owner. For some reason, many owners of autos never replace this very critical part of the gun. The recoil spring in most auto loaders will need to be replaced about every 12,000 to 15,000 shots, or possibly even sooner if the gun



- 4 THE PROPER POSITIONING FOR THE GAS PISTON AND SPRING ON THE 390 BERETTA. (WITH FOREARM WOOD REMOVED)
- 5 THE WEAR POINT WHICH GETS GOUGED BY THE EJECTED BRASS ON A SHELL. THIS IS ALSO THE PLACE THAT THE BROWNING GOLD WILL GET WORN AND GOUGED.
- 6 ALWAYS CHECK THE FIRING PIN RETURN SPRING ON THE 390 AND THE 391.



7 THE BERETTA 390 ACTION ASSEMBLY WITH BOLT.

8 THE NEWER 391 GAS SYSTEM IS ASSEMBLED UNDER THE BARREL, AND THE TWO SPANNER WRENCHES SUPPLIED WITH THE GUN ARE FOR DISASSEMBLY WHEN CLEANING THESE PARTS.

gets a steady diet of the heavier hunting loads. This will protect the gun from slamming itself to an early death, and it will also cut back the felt recoil when the recoil spring is fresh and strong.

INSIDE THE RECEIVER

Like the Remington guns, check the inside receiver rails where the bolt traverses for the sharp edges that show a considerable amount of use. Check the ejection port towards the rear bottom edge for gouging and wear from the brass end of a shell hitting the same spot over and over during the ejection cycle. This is an especially good indicator on how much shooting has been done and will certainly be a factor in the final pricing.

As before, take a good look at

the wood and check for cracks, chips and general nicks and dings. The guns originally came with an extra set of stock shims for adjusting the height of the comb and it would be a plus if the seller had those bits as part of the sale – just in case the stock fit might need some adjustment for your needs. Look for the screw in chokes that should come with the gun – it originally came with four. After market chokes generally add an extra bit to the final price of the gun, especially if they are extended and there are more than four chokes.

THE BROWNING GOLD AUTO

Another very popular used auto is the Browning Gold in its several variations. These guns are similar to the others in that they share some of the same weaknesses.

Again, check the wood for damage and wear. The disassembly of the Browning Gold is much like the others – start by unscrewing the magazine cap to remove the barrel and forearm together. Check the barrel for the usual danger signs such as deep dings or dents. This will leave the gas piston assembly and the action slide assembly in plain view on the magazine tube. Simply slide off the piston and then the action slide. Note that the action slide has a rod connected to it that rides through a slot on the left side of the receiver, not the right side. Push out the trigger retaining pins to gain access to the trigger assembly. Like the other models discussed, the firing pin will leave a deep mark on the hammer face when the gun has been shot a lot. It is a pretty strong assembly that usually has very few problems.

INSIDE THE RECEIVER

The bolt assembly is a little tricky to remove from the receiver if you don't know how. Here's how it's done. On the bottom of the bolt is a black stamped metal part that holds the shell to be fed from the magazine in place. It has a spring under it and you must depress it flat to the bottom of the bolt in order to clear the bolt past the bottom edge of the receiver. Once depressed, just push the bolt out through the front of the receiver. The connecting rod is assembled to the bolt base and will come out with the bolt assembly. Remove the top portion of the bolt body to inspect the firing pin and its return spring for any cracks or breaks in the spring. The Browning will, on occasion, break the firing pin and the firing pin return spring, so it is good practice to have both of these bits as spare parts. The cross pin that holds the firing pin and spring in place is staked and requires a

pretty stout smack with a hammer and pin punch to remove it.

The Browning Gold has a buffer located in the rear of the receiver and it should be replaced if damaged. This buffer keeps the bolt from slamming into the rear of the aluminum receiver body. This receiver, like the Beretta guns, will also show damage in the ejection port from the brass hitting it on cycling. Heavy damage indicates lots of shells have passed through it. The sale price is always negotiable when excessive wear or damage is evident to any of the areas mentioned.

Too often, the caveat '*let the buyer beware*' can be applied to buying a used gun. Far too often in my opinion, guns are often dumped on the used gun market and the unsuspecting or uneducated buyer will pick up a piece of someone else's problem. Still, gun shows, auction sites on the internet, gun stores and pawn shops (one of my personal favorites) will have some fine deals on quality used guns. A savvy buyer will take the time to learn what problems these used autos might have and be able to check them out close enough to identify any problems and pitfalls. In today's world, more than ever, the buyer gets what he pays for. If the price seems too low, it could just be a very good deal, but often it is the first indicator of a used gun with problems. Keep your eyes open more so than your heart and pay close attention to what you see in front of you. Don't let desire cloud your sight and be a smart buyer by not buying firearms with obvious problems. Be willing to walk away if the seller's price is out of line. There will be other deals out there, and with luck and a bit of knowledge, that super deal on a very clean used auto may just be the one sitting in its new home in your gun cabinet. ■