

HOWDAH 20 GA

ORIGINS of the double-barrel flintlock pistol

By DENNIS ADLER

STARING DOWN THE BARRELS OF A LARGE CALIBER HOWDAH PISTOL can be just as intimidating as being on the wrong end of a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun, and at a glance it is an easy mistake to make.


The double-barreled pistol is a very old design dating back to smoothbore double-barreled wheellock pistols from the 1600s. Flintlock designs, like those on which Pedersoli based its new Howdah model, may well have been the "inspiration" for sawed-off doubles seen in the mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries, the latter famously manufactured in the United States by Ithaca Gun Co. from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s as sawed-off shotguns (outlawed by the National Firearms Act of

1934) but reproduced today as a rifled-barrel pistol by Pedersoli and chambered in .45 Colt.

Howdah We Get Here?

The Howdah pistol's prominence in the 19th century comes from the early double-barreled pistols used in India and Africa, first as percussion (loose powder and ball) side-by-side and superposed pistols, and later as breech-loading large caliber cartridge handguns, again in both side-by-side and superposed configurations. On the American Frontier of the 1860s and 1870s, the handful of Howdah-style pistols that found their way West were quickly copied by gunsmiths, as well as those with little more than a hacksaw and an idea, and thus as previously mentioned the possible origin of sawed-off shotguns. A Howdah



A close-up portrait of a man with a grey beard and mustache, wearing a brown cowboy hat with a braided band and a brown leather jacket over a striped shirt. He is holding a wooden box containing a double-barrel flintlock pistol. The pistol is dark wood with silver metal parts and is secured with orange leather straps. The background is a blurred wooden wall.

Going backward in time, Pedersoli's new double-barrel Flintlock pistol is based on original designs from the late 18th and very early 19th centuries, and is chambered in 20 gauge. That's the same as the earlier Pedersoli double hammer percussion model Howdah Hunter, introduced 14 years ago, which is based on later 19th century designs.



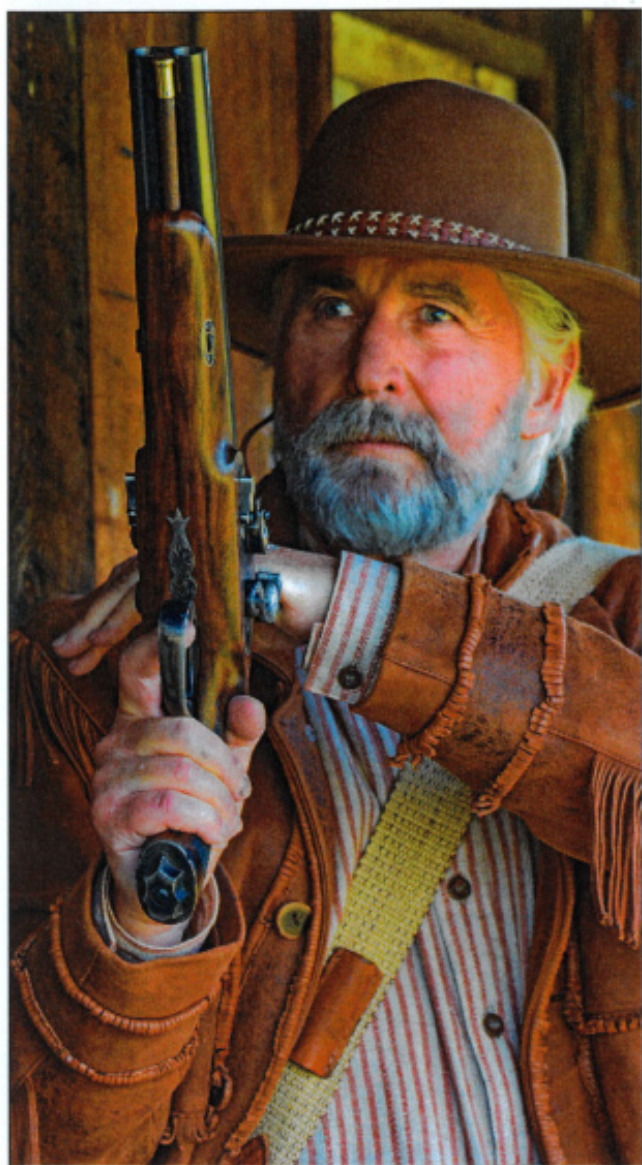
pistol, however, is a far more elegant sidearm than a shotgun that has had its barrels and stock cut down. The finest modern-day example was the double-barrel percussion 20-gauge and .50-caliber Howdah pistols made by Pedersoli in the last decade.

The technical description of a Howdah pistol, as outlined by arms historian Robert J. Maze in his 2002 book *Howdah to High Power*, is that of a "large-caliber (typically rifle-caliber) handgun. Multi-barreled [cartridge-loading] designs were initially favored for Howdah pistols because they offered faster reloading than was pos-

sible with contemporary revolvers." They also offered the advantage of significantly larger calibers than a revolver could provide. The name comes from the big game hunter's sedan chair or "howdah," which was mounted on the back of an elephant. The pistols had their greatest fame during the period of the British Raj in India and were used for protecting hunters in case an attacking tiger or other large game ani-

(Left) Retro-designing Howdah pistols, the first model built by Pedersoli was a double-hammer percussion pistol introduced in 2007. By date of introduction, this older model is historically a later 19th century design compared to the new Flintlock version. **(Below left and below)** Both Blackpowder Howdah models use the same barrel design, with the barrels welded with two central ribs, as would be a shotgun. There are two lugs on the back of the barrels that fit into corresponding recesses in the tang. The barrels are secured to the stock by a single wedge passing through the barrel tenon.





mal was not stopped at a greater distance by a rifle shot. The Howdah pistol was the last line of defense, a large-caliber sidearm designed for close-quarters use. One such gun, an over/under barrel Howdah, figured prominently in the Val Kilmer and Michael Douglas film, *The Ghost and the Darkness*.

"The first Howdah pistols were typically in .577 Snider or .577/450 Martini-Henry caliber," states Maze. However, later on English firearms makers such as Manton & Co. London, and renowned British arms maker Holland & Holland, built specially designed Howdah pistols in both rifle calibers and more conventional handgun calibers such as .455 Webley and .476

At nearly 5 pounds, the Howdah is a hefty gun to handle. It is easiest to cock one hammer at a time, but with both at half cock, it is possible to palm both back before taking aim. Pedersoli recommends cocking one at a time.

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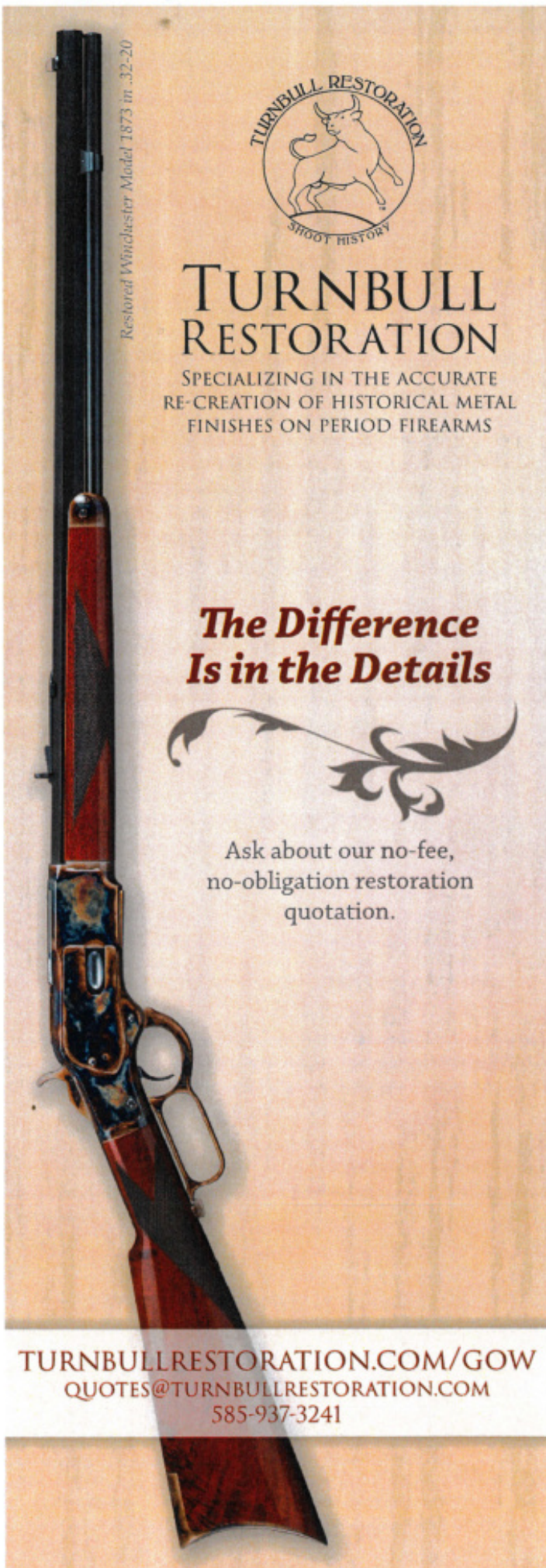
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☞ ...the Howdah flintlock delivers its 20-gauge lead ball into center mass with fair consistency. ☞



Enfield. One pair of Howdahs was even chambered in the American pistol caliber .44-40. Howdah is often applied to any number of English, French, Belgian and other European doubles such as the Lancaster pistol (chambered in calibers from .380 to .577) that were built in the mid to late 19th century.

Although originally intended for use in only the "gravest extremes" against dangerous game, during the late 1880s Her Majesty's Royal Army officers adopted them as defensive weapons in the many far-flung outposts of the British Empire.

★ Flintlock Double

The double-barrel flintlock pistol appeared in Europe during the periods from the mid 1700s to the early 1830s before being replaced by percussion lock designs, which vastly improved loading, carrying and accuracy. Interestingly, the double-barrel Flintlock pistol's predecessor, the intricately-built wheellock, was also manufactured as a double-barrel pistol as far back as the mid-1500s. One example in the Metropolitan Museum of Art was made for Emperor Charles V (1519-1556). So, the double-barrel pistol was far from innovative by the time the

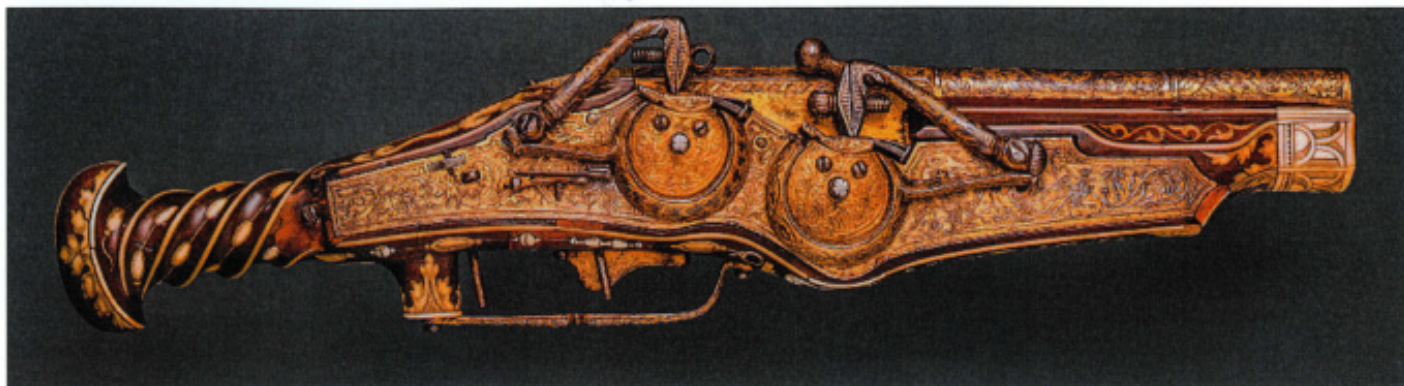
1) Flintlock pistols with side-by-side barrels became popular in England and France in the second half of the 18th century. This luxuriously decorated French pistol exhibits the fashionable Rococo taste for asymmetry and whimsy in its elaborate parcel-gilt silver mounts and silver-wire inlay. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 2) Built c.1815-1820 this Small Flintlock superposed pistol is diminutive in size and elegant in form. Small side-lock pistols like this one were one of Joseph Egg's specialties, prized for their precision craftsmanship and jewel-like quality, as well as their convenience as pocketable weapons. Its novel single-trigger mechanism, designed by Egg, allowed for the barrels to be fired in succession with two pulls of the trigger. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 3) This impressive Howdah Pistol was manufactured in circa 1868 for a Captain Arbuthnot, according to the factory ledger, by Harris Holland prior to his joining forces with his nephew and forming the world famous firm of Holland & Holland in 1876. (Rock Island Auction Co.)

first double-barreled pistols to be called Howdahs arrived in the 1830s.

Even the 15th century wheellock muskets had been preceded by a primitive design known as the match lock, which dates back to a time when horse-mounted soldiers still wore suits of armor. The match lock's firing mechanism was more akin to a flintlock than the wheellock, only here instead of a hammer holding a piece of flint to fall and strike the frizzen when the trigger was pulled, thus creating a spark to ignite the powder charge in the pan, a slow-burning match attached to a serpentine lever was used to ignite the priming powder. As clever as the match-

lock appeared at the time, it was not a particularly reliable weapon, and accuracy with a moving target was sketchy at best. But that would all change in the early 16th century when the wheellock was developed, becoming the first longarm to provide a self-contained system for igniting the priming charge.

The wheellock was nothing if not remarkably inspired, requiring the mechanical skills of a watchmaker to build, and thus a costly weapon to produce and more so to purchase. And like winding a timepiece, some degree of forethought was required. The very exacting internal mechanism utilized a cam, spring and



small chain as part of the lockwork, and required winding with a key (spanner), which locked the exterior wheel into place. One was cautioned to wind the mechanism only in the correct direction, otherwise the gun might be rendered inoperable. When released by pulling the trigger, the tensioned wheel spun against a piece of iron pyrites held in the jaws of the "dog," a lever

lowered into make ready position over the pan that had the serrated edges of the wheel protruding from below. By releasing the trigger, the pan cover was pushed forward allowing the edges of the spinning wheel to engage the iron pyrites (think of it as an old-fashioned Zippo cigarette lighter), creating sparks to ignite the priming charge and then, like its predecessor, set off the

One of the earliest double-barrel pistols, this firearm was designed and produced by Peter Peck, a maker of watches and guns. The two locks combined in one mechanism provided the barrels with separate ignition. Made for Emperor Charles V (reigned 1519–56), the pistol is decorated with his dynastic and personal emblems—the double-headed eagle and the Pillars of Hercules with the Latin motto *PLUS ULTRA* (More beyond). (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

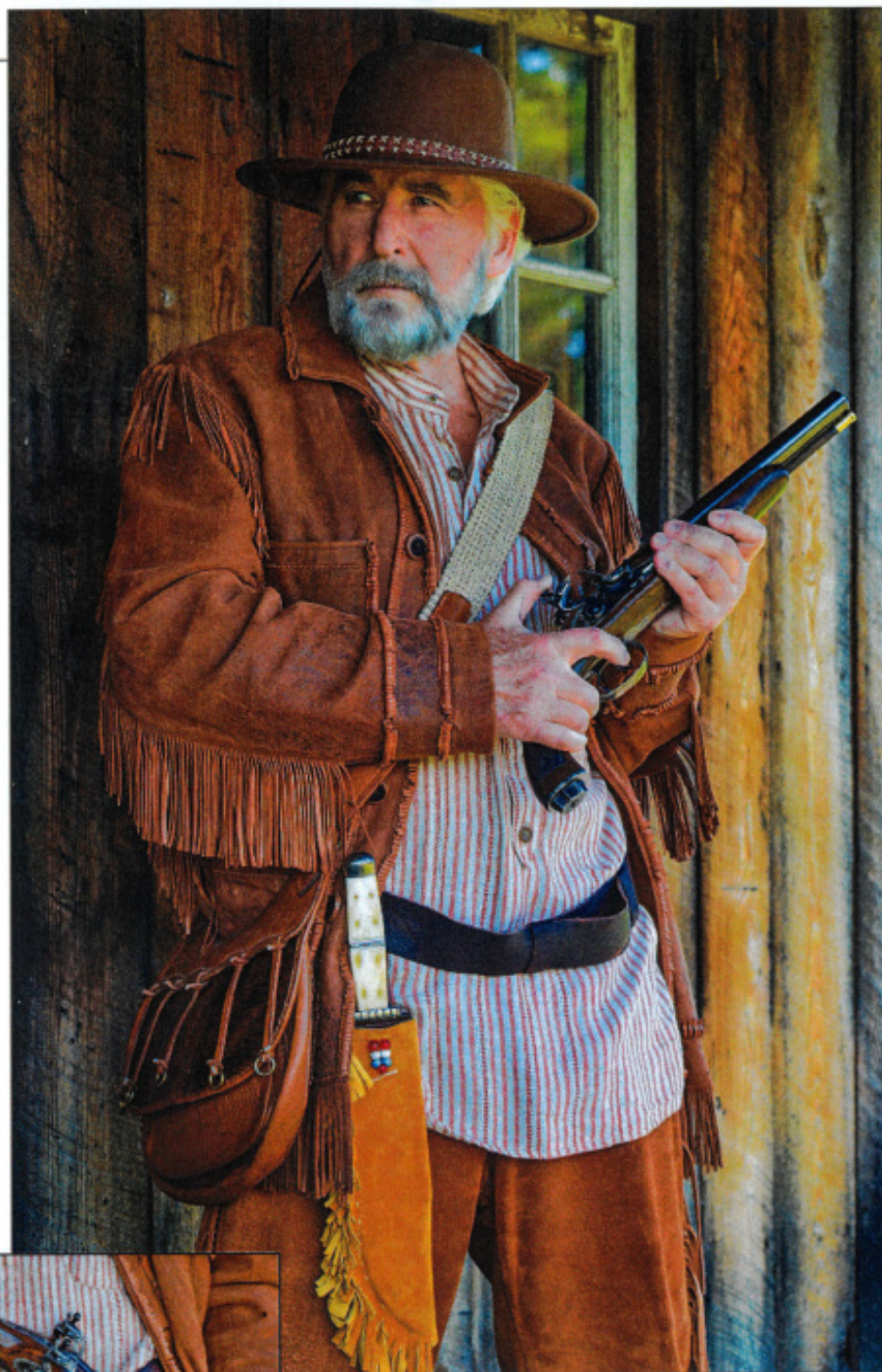
powder in the barrel's breech. This is a very simplistic explanation for a very intricate mechanism that worked well enough to remain in use for more than a century and even be outlawed in some countries.

Despite its complexity, the wheellock was a revolution in firearms design. For the first time, a weapon could be safely carried, loaded and primed to fire, and there was no telltale burning match to give away a soldier's position in the dark. As a military weapon, the wheellock, in the hands of a trained soldier, could hit and, if not kill, most certainly wound an armored soldier on horseback. More significant was that the wheellock mechanism could be used to make pistols as well as long arms, allowing an individual to be armed with a "practical" handgun for the first time in history. Yes, matchlock pistols were also made—most notably in Japan and Portugal around the mid-1500s—but "practical" is still the operative word here.

★ Snaplocks

In the mid-16th century, another and even more practical design emerged—the somewhat short-lived "snaphance" or "snaplock" developed in Europe, principally in Germany, Italy, England, France, Scotland and Spain during the mid to late 1500s.

Though there are varying opinions among firearms historians, the consensus is that the earliest flintlock muskets came out of Normandy around 1615. Unlike the complicated design of the snaphance, which had evolved from the wheellock, the flintlock was of more robust and simpler construction. The mechanism itself was far less intricate, contributing both to its longevity and continuous use from the early 17th through



Two shots, one gun, no waiting... gave a man armed with a double-barrel flintlock a decided advantage in an era when most pistols were single shots.

mid-19th centuries, the longest of any firearm design in history! The basic components were the lock plate and pan, the cock (hammer) and jaws (to hold the flint), steel (frizzen) and pan cover, feather spring (for the steel and pan cover), the mainspring, trigger spring, safety catch spring, and the tumbler, combined with the sear and safety catch bolt (to provide full and half cock positions). It was an easily manufactured device that made the flintlock mechanism suitable to a variety of firearms from long

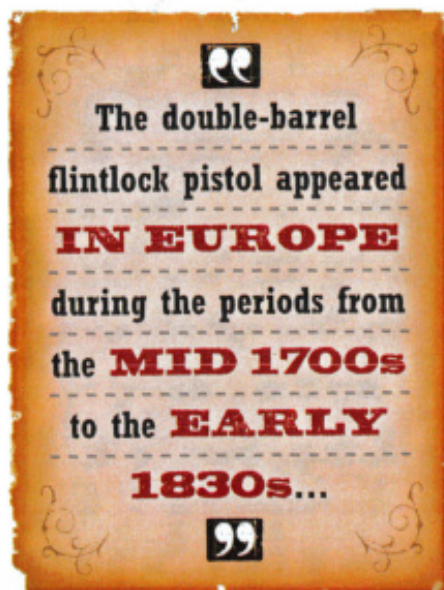
rifles to pistols, and in varying calibers and sizes ranging from small-caliber, pocket-sized pistols to hefty 12-gauge and larger fowlers and double guns.

By the early 1700s, the flintlock was the standardized design for muskets, rifles and pistols the world over. During the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and the American Revolution (1775-1783), the flintlock became de rigueur throughout much of Europe, the whole of the British Empire, and particularly in the Colonies. With the advent of double-barreled flintlock rifles and pistols, the groundwork was laid for similarly designed pistols and, with it, the basic concept for Howdah pistols, like the new Pedersoli Flintlock, and its recent predecessor, the Pedersoli Double-Barreled Flintlock shotgun, upon which the pistol's design is based.

★ Historic Role

Davide Pedersoli has been at the center of manufacturing classic European and American flintlock and percussion rifles and pistols for over 60 years, but the development of a double-barreled flintlock shotgun and pistol is rather new for this legendary Italian arms maker.

Almost 15 years ago, the author sat down with Pierangelo Pedersoli and began a discussion about European Howdah pistols that dated back to the flintlock and percussion era. At the time, Pierangelo was looking for ways to expand the Pedersoli product line, which already included some of the most famous European and American single-shot long arms and pistols in history. My suggestion of a 19th century European double-barreled Howdah pis-



tol intrigued him; over the next couple of years, we discussed such designs. Building a left-side pistol lock was the hardest part, even though the company already had the Kodiak Express double rifle. Pierangelo made some prototypes, and in the Fall 2007 the first examples of the Pedersoli Howdah were introduced in 20-gauge and .50-caliber Howdah Hunter versions.

A few years later, we discussed the next step (actually, a step back) making a double-barreled flintlock Howdah pistol. Again, the left-side lock was going to be the most difficult part of the design. In the years in between, our discussions led to the development of the rifled barrel .45/.410 Howdah based on the 1920's Ithaca Auto

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The Flintlock Howdah is based on Pedersoli's Flintlock double-barrel shotgun, which uses a similar lock and trigger design.

& Burglar model. That gun was introduced in 2016, and while a giant leap forward in time, still left our old "pet project" flintlock Howdah to be addressed.

Pierangelo took the most pragmatic approach and developed Davide Pedersoli's first double-barreled flintlock shotgun just in time for the company to celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2018 (Fall 2018 *Guns of the Old West*). This classic, French-inspired, 20-gauge double gun came stocked in select oil-finished American walnut with deep checkering on the wrist and forend, and provided a part of the fundamental design for the new Howdah Hunter Flintlock double-barreled pistol, introduced this year.

The Pedersoli Howdah Flintlock is a classic dou-

ble-barrel pistol in the English gunsmith school of design with double flintlock actions typical of mid-1700's designs and handsomely color-cased furniture. The stock and barrel design is based on the Howdah Hunter 20-gauge percussion models using a three-quarter stock of European

walnut, hand checkered pistol grip and deeply fluted color-cased steel butt cap. Like the Flintlock double-barrel shotgun, the pistol is also chambered in 20 gauge. Following the Howdah percussion model, the front sight is a brass bead as would be found on a shotgun. The nicely browned

barrels are the same 11.25 inches in length as the blued percussion model, and also held in place by a single large cross pin. The overall length is again just shy of 18 inches with color casing used for the tang and triggerguard. This is a massive pistol. The Howdah Flintlock double weighs in at an impressive 4.9 pounds (about 6 ounces heavier than a Walker Colt) and is not for the weak of wrist (with the mass of

SPECIFICATIONS

Pedersoli Howdah Double-Barrel Flintlock Pistol



Gauge: 20x20 • **Barrel:** 11.25 inches

OA Length: 18 inches • **Weight:** 4.9 pounds (empty)

Stock: Walnut • **Sights:** Brass bead front • **Action:** Double-hammer flintlock

Finish: Browned barrels, color case hardened steel furniture

Capacity: 2 • **MSRP:** \$1,350

the pistol forward of the slim checkered pistol grip) or trigger finger (with average trigger pulls well over 12 pounds).

★Range Test

Such guns were usually carried in a pom-mel holster, but a man on foot would have to have carried it tucked behind a belt or in a pouch. I carried it in a belt with the pistol in a cross-draw cant, leaving the gracefully curved grip right at hand. Loaded, the Howdah Flintlock is carried in the half-cock position, making it a little easier to cock; it's easy to pull the right hammer back on the draw, or you can roll both hammers back into the cocked position with the palm of your of hand (if you have the strength). However, it is best to cock each separately when firing, and this is also recommended by Pedersoli.

(Right) The Ithaca Auto & Burglar pistol of the 1920s was the inspiration for Pedersoli's first cartridge loading Howdah Pistol chambered in 45 Colt. The gun with rifled barrels, to make it a pistol and not a sawed off shotgun, can also chamber .410 gauge shells. **(Below)** The Pedersoli has beautiful browned barrels and color cased furniture. The three-quarter stock is European walnut with a hand checkered pistol grip and deeply fluted color cased steel butt cap.

Fired as a large-caliber pistol, for which it is best suited, the 20x20 Flintlock was loaded with .610 round ball and 0.10 Ox-Yoke Patch, backed by 28 grains of Goex FFg black powder. Pedersoli's initial recommended load is 28 grains. As I proceeded with the test, I increased the powder charge to 32 grains since my test of the percussion Howdah had used 35 grains. To prime the pan, I used Goex FFFg.

For the range test of the Flintlock model, I used a two-handed hold with the support hand under the forearm for best accuracy shooting at a silhouette target set out at 30 feet. I decided on the closer range over my original 45 feet after test shots proved a bit less accurate. This is a finicky pistol, as flintlocks can sometimes be, and is disposed to fouling after only a few rounds. It is also a good idea to use a nipple

pick to make sure the vent hole is open to the powder charge. Having said that, given the heavy trigger pull, the gun requires a strong hold to keep it on point of aim (POA). I found a tendency for the Howdah Flintlock to hit to the left and after a couple of shots, I corrected my aim to the right and 3 inches low. On the silhouette target that was POA at 3 o'clock on the 8-ring to consistently hit at 12 o'clock in the 9-ring, with a best two consecutive shots measuring 1.25 inches at 12 o'clock with one of the pair cutting the 10-ring line. All my test shots at 30 feet hit in the 9-ring. My best two-shot group measured 1.25 inches.

★Final Notes

It will take some fine tuning to get better accuracy, but as its original intent was as a close-quarters defense pistol, the Howdah flintlock delivers its 20-gauge lead ball into center mass with fair consistency. However, swabbing out the barrels, the pan and cleaning the touchhole with the pick after four rounds proved a must with this gun. Some longrifle shooters swab their barrel after every shot, so this is not as ominous as it sounds for the double-barrel pistol. Additionally,

there are better powder and lube options than I shot that can reduce fouling, but overall, the Howdah is one great piece of history recreated by Pedersoli.

In the American West of the 1820s and 1830s, there weren't any tigers, but there were many things frontiersmen encountered that were just as deadly. As a sidearm, a Howdah pistol was impressive, offering a quick second shot in a large and effective caliber. And, as it turns out, the new Howdah is a perfect complement to Pedersoli's 20-gauge double-barreled flintlock shotgun. For more information, visit italianfirearmsgroup.com. ☼

