

A Stagecoach Shotgun For Home Defense?

By Staff



In this day of black, wicked looking “assault” shotguns, the “Alley Sweepers” and other intimidating creations, we choose to go back nearly 150 years to a shotgun that served its purpose with simplicity and ruggedness.

The history of the American West was written, literally, with firearms. And although this occurred during a surprisingly brief period more than 150 years ago, many guns from this time are well-known today. In fact, thanks to Hollywood, even those with little interest in firearms recognize the Colt Single Action Army revolver and the Winchester lever-action rifle as “The Guns That Won The West.”

Lesser known is the coach gun. But, in the overall scheme of things it was certainly as important as those other weapons — possibly more so — when it came to settling the West.

PROTECTION RACKET

The term “coach gun” emerged in 1858 when Wells, Fargo & Co. began regular stagecoach service from Tipton, Mo., to San Francisco, Calif. The route was 2800 miles long, and passed through some of the most lawless areas of the West. In addition to carrying passengers, Wells Fargo also had contracts for the U.S. Mail, as well as the task of transporting gold shipments to its banking facilities.



A familiar scene from any of dozens of Wild West movies. This stagecoach is being protected by a guard riding “shotgun.” Armed with a double-barrel, exposed hammer, 12 ga. shotgun — a tough job for a tough guy — with a tough gun!

To say that the coaches became a tempting target for outlaws is an understatement. In fact, robbing stagecoaches became a cottage industry in some areas, and between 1870 and 1884 Wells Fargo stages were the target of 347 robbery attempts.

Getting the stage and its valuable cargo through was not a job for the faint-hearted, and some of the best in the West

accepted the challenge. Among those who spent time driving stagecoaches were Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody and Morgan Earp.

Riding with them was an armed guard toting a coach gun.

This wasn't a specific make or model of firearm. It was a moniker earned through circumstance by a gener-

al class of guns. These were compact, side-by-side double-barreled shotguns featuring barrels in the 12 to 20 inch range to allow easy handling in the cramped driver's seat of the stage.

Virtually all featured twin triggers, with one trigger for each barrel. Most were equipped with external hammers, called "mule ears," although some hammerless models were produced. The 12-ga. likely was the most popular, although the 10-ga. and, to a lesser extent, the 16-ga. were widely used.



Above is Remingtons offering to the Coach Gun needs. Below, right, is an example of the Colt Coach gun of 1878. Both are now collectables.

Although repeating rifles held more rounds and had a greater range, only in Hollywood does one score consistent hits on moving targets from the bouncing box of a fleeing stagecoach. The multiple-shot charge from a smoothbore was far more likely to score, and since only hits counted in that situation, shotguns were the choice of savvy stage guards.

There were some repeating shotguns available that could hold more than the two rounds of the double barrel, but their mechanisms were rather delicate and not up to the rigors of stage travel. That made them less than reliable.

The sturdy little double barrels suffered no such ills. They were virtually indestructible, and even if heavily fouled they would fire as long as shells could be rammed into the chambers and the action closed. Should fouling become excessive, a quick wipe on the breech face and chambers with a shirt-tail would put the gun back into action.

When it came to guarding the stage, the coach gun reigned supreme. In fact, the term "riding shotgun" is still in common use today. But, as effective as the coach gun was, its reign was brief.

By the late 1890s, railroads were carrying the bulk of gold shipments. Stage lines were in decline and provided rather meager pickings for robbers. At the same time, smokeless powder came into use, as did more reliable repeating shotguns, like the 6-shot Winchester Model 97 pump.

The coach gun lay dominant until the 1980's when a shooting sport called "Cowboy Action Shooting" or other similar names. A spin-off of the well established PPC (Practical Pistol



The above photo shows the rugged, simplicity of coach guns. This model has a safety added. Original design didn't.



Competition), Cowboy Action matches utilized the weapons, costumes and "old west" type targets to add realism.

In our world of demand causing supply, it wasn't long before coach guns became available. Rossi, the well know Brazilian arms mfg. was among the first to offer new coach guns at a reasonable price. The author has one, obtained in the 1980's for \$150.00. Unfortunately, Rossi, along with other manufacturers, have since discontinued their coach gun line.



One Coach Gun still available from Stoeger in both blued and nickel plated. It is hammerless, chambered 2-3/4 & 3", in 12, 20 and .410 ga. msrp is approx \$400.00.

http://www.stoegerindustires.com/firearms/stoeger_coach_guns

There was a time in rural America when most farm homes had a shotgun and it typically hung over the door frame leading from the kitchen to the utility room or “mud-room,” where dirty shoes and clothes were changed before entering the cleaner part of the house.

Nothing fancy — usually 2 - 16 penny nails. Old horseshoes were sometimes fashioned into gun hangers. The shotgun would be loaded, ready for predator’s and stray dogs that might be endangering livestock.

If the farmer was, also, a hunter, the over-the-door-gun would be an old clunker with his better hunting guns being kept in a more sacred place.

Hanging the gun over the door frame, kept it away from small children. By the time a farm kid was old enough to figure how to climb on something to reach the gun, he usually had a gun of his own!

I own a Rossi Coach Gun (no longer mfgd. by Rossi) with a very tight action. I prefer to keep it at ready as shown in the photo above. It isn’t cocked and you can readily see that it is loaded.

Once you grab it, the action is snapped shut and hammers cocked, if you are at this stage of defense. The latching of the action closing makes a distinct sound; much like with a pump action, when a round is chambered. Hopefully, the sound will cause your attacker to stop. Checkmate! The game’s over.

If the closing of the action has defused the situation, please don’t carry through and shoot your attacker. You stopped the attack, which was the purpose of your defensive action. To carry through might, in the eyes of the law, change your action from self-defense to homicide! A very thin line!

Should your attacker continue toward you with weapon or physical size capable of inflicting harm to you, then you are justified to put an end to his attack.

One question everyone seems to



This tight-action old Rossi will remain like this until either latched shut or fully opened. With the shell heads showing, you are assured that it is loaded.

The load you choose is your call to make. I prefer #4 buck shot. However, at the close range you’ll likely be using such a gun, even loads of smaller bird shot will still be hitting the assailant in one small group.

Smaller shot lessens the chance of penetrating a wall into another room.

inject is: “What size shot should I have in my defensive shotgun?”

ple of each from your shotgun. Use scrap wall board, etc.

Since you have a wide range of ammo choices, you should consider the following criteria:

1. Your prime objective is to save your life by effectively stopping your attacker. The load should be capable of doing this job.
2. Being responsible for the ending location of every shot you make, you must consider wall penetration, whereby an innocent victim might be injured.
3. You should be aware of the “patterning” of different loads at various distances. This can be done by firing a sam-

You should quickly observe that a shotgun, despite many myths, doesn’t “clean out the entire room.” Within the distance you’ll most likely be using your defensive shotgun, you’ll notice that the shot load doesn’t spread as much as most erroneously think it should.

This means that even a load of heavy bird shot, such as No. 6 can be an effective defense load. Personally, I like No. 4 buck shot. They are .24 in diameter and a 2-3/4 inch shell contains 27 pellets.

Think and study —