

4

THE “SMITH & WESSON” REVOLVERS FROM “ORBEA HERMANOS”

In his “Memoirs”, Don Julian Echeverria, the first Director of the Eibar School of Gunsmithing, tells us how it happened that the Smith & Wesson N° 3 started to be produced in Eibar:

“During the 1870-75 Carlist War there was in Madrid a gun shop owned by D. Lucas “Lucachua”; One day while Don Ignacio Ibarzabal, the famous Eibar gun maker, was visiting the shop, an “*indiano*” (a Spaniard living in the New World) entered and asked for cartridges for “a Smith & Wesson revolver”; Since that revolver was then not known in Spain and D. Lucas could not accommodate him, Mr. Ibarzabal offered to trade him another revolver for his, probably a Lefauchaux with its pin fire cartridges; The trade was accepted and Mr. Ibarzabal took the center fire Smith & Wesson revolver back to Eibar with him .../... The famous revolver then (eventually) became the property of the Orbea family.../....From this date on, at the end of the second Carlist War, and for the next 60 years, the revolvers from the Springfield (Massachussetts) House of Smith & Wesson, became the principal basis of the Eibar Arms Industry”.

This anecdote must have occurred before November of 1874 because on this date there was a gun shop in Madrid, property of Don Joaquin Aramburu, located at the *Calle de Regueros N° 7*, which already had a stock of N° 3 Smith & Wesson revolvers, which were being offered to those Officers and Chiefs of the Army who may have wanted to buy them, according to the publicity add: “at a price of 585 or 450 *Reales*, depending on whether they had or not a shoulder stock so as to use them as a long gun”; Special payment terms from Mr. Aramburu were also included in the communiqué of November, 23, 1874, from the General Artilley Directorate recommending and “authorizing its use to the Chiefs and Officers of the different branches of the Army as long as the dimensions of the revolvers allow them to fit in the regulation holster”.... which limited them to a 6 ½ “ barrel length, although many probably simply used larger holsters.

On December, 9, 1876, Joaquin Aramburu, who represented Ignacio Ibarzabal and the Orbea brothers in Madrid, submitted an application, under the brother’s name for a “privilege of introduction”, which read in its preamble: “For a six shot, center fire “*revolver*” pistol known abroad as the Smith & Wesson system”; Unfortunately part of the document is missing but must have included drawings of one of the “American” models, as in its abstract they express the desire of producing it with variations such as a rounded grip more to European tastes, and, in several calibers and barrel lengths.

The “privilege” was approved and “Orbea Hermanos” then had, for a period of five years, the exclusive authorization for making this revolver in Spain; However they took longer than the one year limit established by law for starting production in order to keep the “privilege” in force, and had to request an extension alleging that the General Manager of the firm, Don Juan Manuel Orbea, had been ill.

Actual manufacturing started in 1878; In his “Memoirs”, Julian Echeverria tells us that: “the firm of Orbea Hermanos rifled the barrels for the Smith & Wesson revolvers on a hand operated machine”, a method that, although of fair precision, was also very slow”; So, “Don Mateo Orbea, the soul of the firm, invented another much faster, but much less precise, method” in which, instead of rifling (the barrel) with a razor, making several successive passes on each groove, he used a pointed rod which was hammered in“.....”This archaic method became generalized and brought very little honor to our arms making industry, as the ballistic results of the revolvers made with such rifling left much to be desired; During the first years of this century (the 20th) some shops returned to rifling with the razor but using automatic machines”.



Copy of the Smith & Wesson Model 3 Russian third Model, six shot, 44 “Russian” Cal. revolver, barrel length 131 mm, marked: “ORBEA HERMANOS (EIBAR) CON PRIVILEGIO EN ESPAÑA”, number 630.

Due to its desire to make the “Smith & Wesson” revolver with a grip more in the European style, “Orbea Hermanos” probably started by reproducing the 44 caliber “Third Model Russian” and these were the basis for those made by this firm for the Artillery Officer Luis Ibarra (see the next Chapter) incorporating his empty shell casing gas extraction system and these were followed by a reproduction of the “Nº 3 New Model”, in variants with or without trigger guard hook.





Copy of the Smith & Wesson N° 3 New Model, six shot, 44 cal. revolver with detachable shoulder stock, barrel length 180 mm, marked: "ORBEA HERMANOS (EIBAR) CON PRIVILEGIO EN ESPAÑA", serial number 3,189.



Copy of the Smith & Wesson N° 3 New Model, six shot, 44 cal. revolver with detachable shoulder stock, with hookless trigger guard; Barrel length 178 mm, marked: "ORBEA HERMANOS (EIBAR) CON PRIVILEGIO EN ESPAÑA", serial number 8,891; This one is missing the lanyard ring.



Copy of the Smith & Wesson N° 3 New Model, six shot, 44 cal. revolver with trigger guard hook; Barrel length 178 mm, marked: “FABRICA DE ORBEA HERMANOS (EIBAR) ESPAÑA”, serial number 884; The absence of any reference to a “Privilege” indicates it was made after the privilege expired in 1882.

The “Smith & Wesson N° 3 New Model” made by “Orbea Hermanos”, such as the last three specimens shown in this chapter, was the model produced in largest quantities; Its production exceeded the five years of exclusivity granted by the “privilege” and, for this reason, those specimens of late manufacture no longer mention it in their markings.

The last specimen shown is the one that “Orbea Hermanos” stated was made in a quantity of 2,000 units for the “*guardias de Cuba*”; This contract’s date must have been after the expiration of the “privilege” when the manufacture of the “Smith & Wessons” was becoming generalized in Eibar, as other firms, such as “Garate e Hijo” and its successor “Garate, Larrañaga y Comp^a”, also made this model under contract for the Cuban authorities.