

Weapons of the Red River War



A model 1873 Springfield .45-70 carbine. The accuracy and range of this weapon made it more effective in many ways for warfare on the Plains.



A Spencer Carbine.

Prior to the Indian Wars of the mid-1870s, the preferred weapons of the U.S. Army were the Spencer repeating carbine and .50 caliber, single shot Springfield rifle and Sharps carbine. The Army selected the Springfield .45 caliber rifle in 1873 as the weapon for the infantry and the shorter carbine of the same caliber for the cavalry. These were the arms primarily used by the Army during the Red River War. Like the Springfield .50 caliber, the Springfield .45s were single shot weapons that had to be reloaded after each fired round. The best effective range for the Springfield .45 carbine was less than 400 yards, but significant hits could be made up to 600 yards. The bullet was driven out of the muzzle at a velocity of about 1,200 feet per second, and it could travel more than 1,000 yards

Archeological evidence gathered from the Red River War battle sites indicates that the Indians were primarily using repeating rifles such as the Spencer that fired a .50 caliber cartridge and could fire seven rounds before loading, and the Winchester or Henry rifles that fired a .44 caliber cartridge and could each hold up to 16 rounds of ammunition. Most likely, the Indians acquired the Spencers, Winchesters, and Henrys after the Civil War when large numbers of these weapons became available to frontier traders and gunrunners.

With the Indians using repeating rifles and the Army using single shot weapons, it might appear that the Indians had the superior arms. In fact, many officers who served the Union during the Civil War and were familiar with the Spencer's

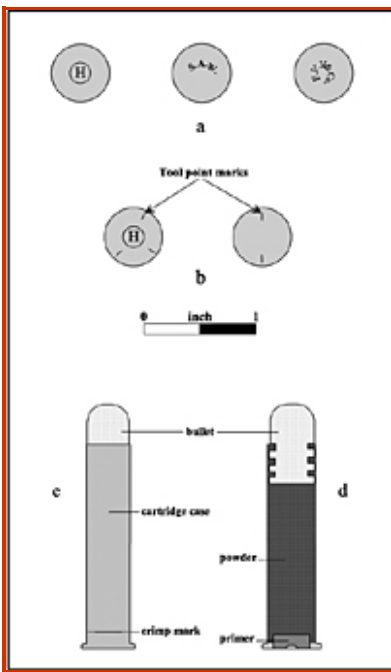


A model 1866 Winchester rifle.

Click images to enlarge



A Henry model 1866 rifle.



Components of a cartridge: a, examples of head stamps; b, tool point marks; c, exterior and d, interior of a .45-70 cartridge. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.

firepower were very reluctant to exchange the repeating Spencer for the new single shot Springfield .45. So why did the Army change from the Spencer to the Springfield? There appear to be two main reasons the Army made the change—one financial and one tactical. After the Civil War, the Army was forced to cut back on expenditures. The Army had recognized that a soldier armed with a repeating rifle would expend a large amount of ammunition during battle whether he had a clear target in sight or not. The belief was that with a single shot rifle, the soldier would become more efficient with his ammunition and take only clear shots at his target.

Further, many officers had come to believe that the single shot Springfield was a weapon superior to the Spencer. The new .45 caliber Springfield cartridge had greater accuracy and velocity at long ranges. Many of the Army officers who had experienced warfare on the Plains realized they needed those advantages in combating what could be characterized as "guerilla warfare." Indians tended to stay at a distance from the soldiers and to engage in close range combat only when the enemy was clearly outnumbered or could be surprised with a sudden attack. Therefore, even though the Spencer, Winchester, and Henry repeating rifles could fire more rounds in a shorter amount of time than the single-shot Springfield, it appears the Springfield, with its longer range, was the superior gun of the Indian Wars.

There were weapons other than rifles and carbines that were used by the U.S. Army and the Indians during the Red River War. The Indians, for example, also used the bow and arrow. Metal arrowpoints that were either made by the Indians or were acquired through trade were found at several of the battle sites. Although bows and arrows may have played a part in the battles, the long range at which most of the fighting occurred during the battles did not allow the bow and arrow a prominent role.

In 1874, the U.S. Army also used the Colt single action Army revolver. This pistol fired six .45-caliber cartridges. The effective range of the Colt revolver dropped off rapidly over 60 yards. During the campaign, the Army employed various kinds of artillery as well. Colonel Nelson A. Miles, for example, had two Gatling guns that fired a .50 caliber bullet. The Gatling gun was capable of firing up to 300 rounds per minute. At the Battle of Red River on August 30, 1874, Col. Nelson Miles



Metal arrow points used by the Southern Plains Indians. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.



A 10-pounder Parrott Rifle.



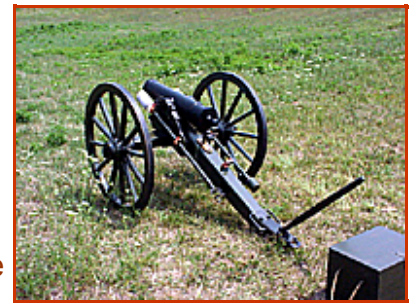
A shell for a 10-pounder Parrott rifle.

used the Gatling against the Southern Cheyenne—the first time the gun was used in combat west of the Mississippi River. Miles also brought along a 10-pounder Parrott rifle, which was actually a small cannon. The Parrott rifle fired a shell that measured 8.8 inches long by 2.86 in diameter. The shell exploded upon impact and the shell casing became the shrapnel. The maximum range of the 10-pounder Parrott rifle at five degrees elevation was about 2,000 yards.



Shrapnel pieces from an exploded Parrott shell, found by THC archeologists during survey. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.

Another piece of artillery that was used by the Army during the Red River War was the mountain howitzer. The howitzer was a short-barreled cannon designed to fire projectiles with relatively small powder charges at short ranges. The howitzer was capable of firing either the spherical shell or the cylindrical canister.



A mountain howitzer.