By John Marshall

The Savage Arms Company was a fierce competitor in the handgun market at the beginning of the 20th Century. Its Model 1907 .45 caliber pistol went up against John Browning’s immortal Model 1911 in the final U.S. military service pistol trials. In that contest the Browning entry ultimately prevailed, but the basic design of that Savage pistol lived on for years in a series of quality pocket pistols that were very popular in their day. Today those pistols are classic collectibles.

Arthur Savage was born in 1857 in Kingston, Jamaica. He subsequently lived in England and Australia, but finally wound up in New York working for a publisher of scientific works. There, he developed skills in conceptualizing and designing. He filed a patent for a fiber-cleaning machine in 1886 and then devoted his attention to firearms. His first design was in 1887, for a .45-70 military rifle fed from a tubular magazine. Having sold the design to Hartley & Graham, he and his family moved to Utica, New York to manage a struggling railroad. He meanwhile worked on a lever-action rifle. On April 5, 1894, he started the Savage Repeating Arms Company in Utica. His Model 1895 rifle was actually made by Marlin, but Savage soon built his own factory. With a name change to Savage Arms, he began production on the improved Model 99 hammerless lever action rifle. It was very popular and was produced by Savage well into the 1980s. Savage Arms continues operations to the present day.

In the early 1900s William Condit, Elbert Searle and Morris Smith had collaborated on pistol designs, and had received a patent for an interesting handgun. Condit brought the patent to the attention of Savage Arms in 1904, and in late 1905 or early 1906, the company bought the rights to it. This design became, with certain improvements and modifications, the Model 1907 .45 pistol. While the U.S. Military trials of this pistol were continuing, the company worked on developing pocket pistol versions. The Savage .45 pistol was not adopted by the military, but the work on the smaller pistols proved successful.

The first of these was the Model 1907 pocket pistol, in .32 ACP caliber, introduced in 1908. This single-action pistol pointed naturally and featured a higher-capacity two column 10-round magazine. “10 shots quick” became the company’s catch phrase for the pistol, but with an additional round in the chamber, it had an actual capacity of 11 rounds. Another selling point for the gun was its semi-locked breech, which was unique for a pocket pistol at the time. The pistol sold well, and going into 1909 Savage could not keep up with demand. Production and sales increased with endorsements from “Buffalo Bill” Cody, “Bat” Masterson, and shooter/author Edward C. Crossman. Guns of the same design in .380 caliber were introduced in 1917. In World War I (then known as “The Great War”) many shipments were made to France, and one order was sent to Portugal. During the wartime years U.S. sales of these pistols surged significantly. Following the conflict, additional company sales records were set in 1919 and 1920. A number of variations of the Model 1907 were produced, each with only minor internal and external differences. These pistols were equipped with a rotating unlocking barrel, classifying the action as a delayed blowback type. The company nonetheless billed it as a locked-breech design. Upon firing, the barrel rotated about five degrees, moving a lug or