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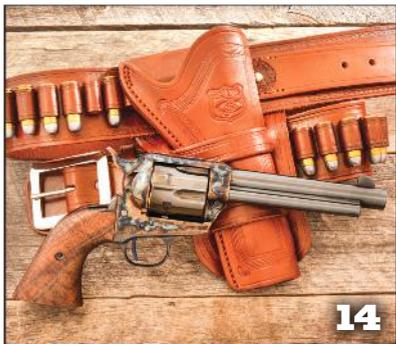
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# GUNS

## OF THE OLD WEST

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# DERINGER'S DERRINGERS

How one man's name became a catch-all term for a type of pistol



By T. LOGAN METESH

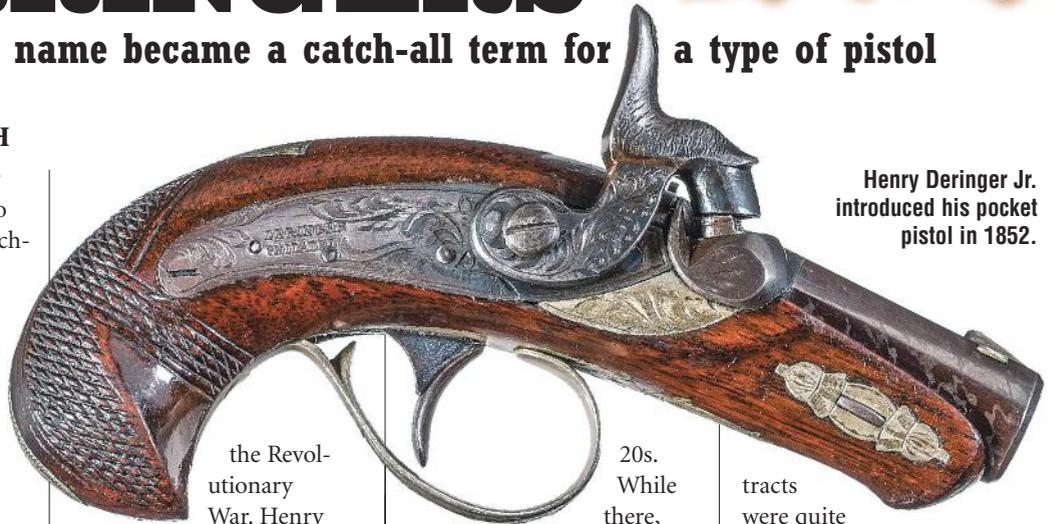
It's not uncommon for brand-name objects to assume the role of catch-all terms for their generic equivalents. The two most obvious and ubiquitous examples are when you refer to all facial tissues as Kleenex and all cotton swabs as Q-Tips.

While not nearly as common in the realm of firearms, the same thing does happen from time to time. That's the case with the terms "derringer" and "Deringer." If you didn't know that there was a difference, then this story is for you. Or, perhaps you knew there was a difference, but didn't really think it meant much. This story is for you, too.

Now that we've established that they're two different terms, why are they different and what do they mean? For starters, the catch-all spelling uses a lower-case "d" and has two "r's," while the brand-name version uses an upper-case "D" and has only one "r." This is because the latter is a proper name.

## Meet The Man

Henry Deringer Jr. had gunsmithing in his blood. His father, an immigrant from Germany, came to the American colonies before



the Revolutionary War. Henry Deringer Sr. settled in Pennsylvania and was known for making the now-iconic Pennsylvania-style long rifles and pistols.

Born in 1786, the younger Deringer apprenticed at the Virginia Manufactory in Richmond while in his early

20s. While there, he learned the intricacies of the trade by making arms for the Virginia state militia. Upon completion of his apprenticeship, he moved back to Philadelphia and opened up his own gunsmith shop.

By 1814, much of Henry's time was occupied with filling various government contracts. These con-

tracts were quite lucrative, and it was the desire of most gunmakers in this era—just as it is today—to obtain one. Deringer ended up making more than 20,000 Model 1814 and Model 1817 flintlock long arms. He also made some 50,000 flintlock trade arms, including those for John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company.

When the military contracts waned after the end of the War of 1812, Deringer shifted his focus to firearms for private purchase. By the 1840s, he had left government work behind and focused solely on the civilian market. The decision to make this market shift would lead to his name becoming forever linked to pocket pistols, whether he actually made them or not.

What we think of today as the quintessential Philadelphia-style derringer

Henry Deringer Jr. introduced his pocket pistol in 1852.



Hollywood popularized the derringer, as evidenced by John Wayne's Remington Double Derringer.

came to fruition in 1852. In the years immediately prior to this, during the height of the Gold Rush, Henry had seen the rise in need for a small, concealable arm suitable for personal protection. Colt's Model 1849 Pocket revolver was selling quite well, and while it was indeed small when compared to the Model 1851, it was hardly a pocket pistol.

In order to create something that really could fit in someone's pocket, Deringer realized that creating any kind of revolver was out of the question. (It would still

Over the following decades, the lines got blurrier as "derringer" became AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR TERM for any easily concealable pistol.

be a few years before Smith & Wesson came out with the .22 Short cartridge, ushering in the era of pocket revolvers.)

### True Pocket Deringer

Henry's creation would have to be a simple, single-shot design. Unfortunately for Deringer, there was nothing new about any of the mechanisms employed in his pistol. This meant that there was nothing for him to patent and make uniquely his own. He also failed to

legally trademark his name and the way it was marked on his guns, which was "DERINGER/PHILADELA" stamped on the lock plate or the top of the barrel.

If Deringer's pistol design had been uniquely his or if he had trademarked his name, then it's quite possible that he would have become one of hundreds of arms inventors whose names and creations in the 19th century are generally lost to history among the behemoths such as Colt, Remington and Smith & Wesson.

The lack of a patented design created a legal headache for Henry for the rest of his life, but it also, somewhat ironically, cemented his place in arms-maker history and the American lexicon.

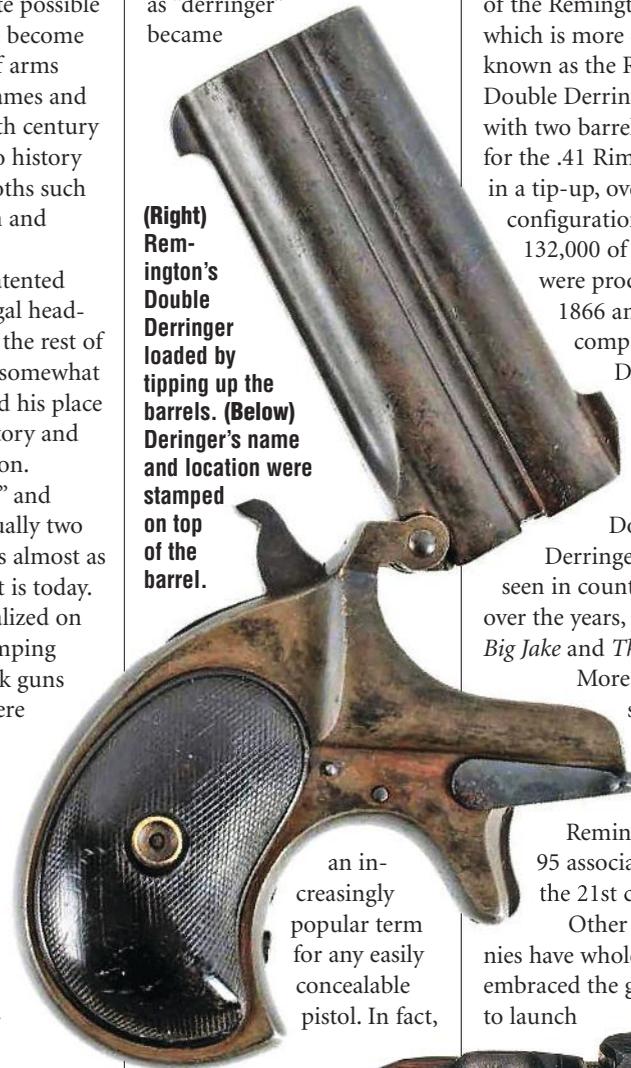
That "derringer" and "Deringer" are actually two different things was almost as unknown then as it is today. Competitors capitalized on this and began stamping their knock-off lock guns with names that were similar in spelling and sound to the real thing. Some examples include H. Deringer, J. Deringer, Deeringer, Beringer and Derringer.

The exact number of companies making copies of Deringer's design is unknown; it is believed that there were at least half a dozen in

Philadelphia alone! One such Philly-based maker, Slotter & Company, even employed former Deringer employees. As a result, their guns were almost indistinguishable from the genuine ones.

Over the following decades, the lines got blurrier as "derringer" became

(Right) Remington's Double Derringer loaded by tipping up the barrels. (Below) Deringer's name and location were stamped on top of the barrel.



an increasingly popular term for any easily concealable pistol. In fact,

my computer's word processor insists that I've spelled derringer wrong every time I write the proper noun.

### Modern Derringers

When most people think of that kind of gun, they'll often conjure up an image of the Remington Model 95, which is more commonly known as the Remington Double Derringer. Outfitted with two barrels chambered for the .41 Rimfire cartridge in a tip-up, over/under

configuration, more than 132,000 of these pistols were produced between

1866 and 1935. By comparison, Henry

Deringer only made 15,000 of his pistols.

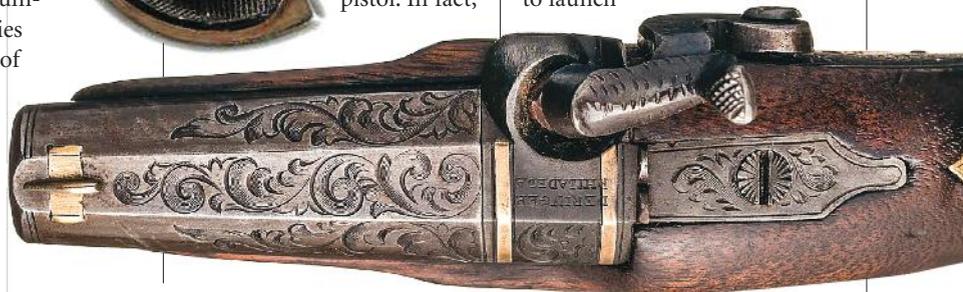
The Remington Double

Derringer has been seen in countless westerns over the years, including *Big Jake* and *The Shootist*.

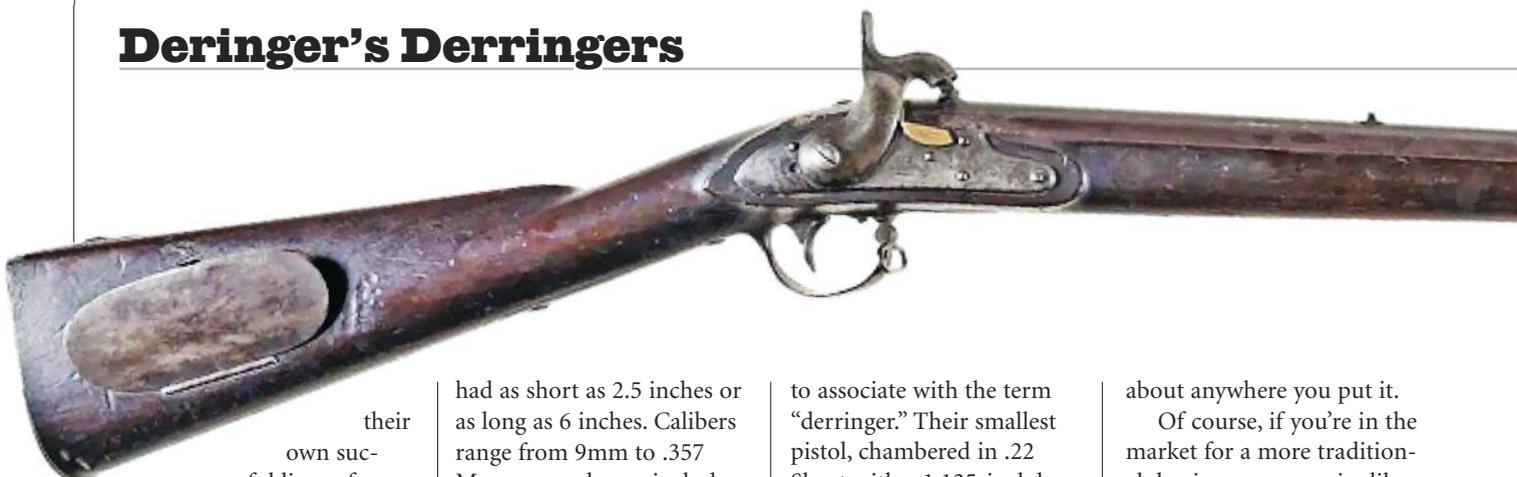
More recent TV shows such as *Deadwood* have helped keep the

Remington Model 95 association alive in the 21st century.

Other companies have wholeheartedly embraced the generic term to launch



# Deringer's Derringers



their own successful lines of derringers. One is Bond Arms, with 17 different models and 37 interchangeable barrels, all based on the classic tip-up, over/under configuration. Barrels can be

had as short as 2.5 inches or as long as 6 inches. Calibers range from 9mm to .357 Magnum and even include .410 shotshells.

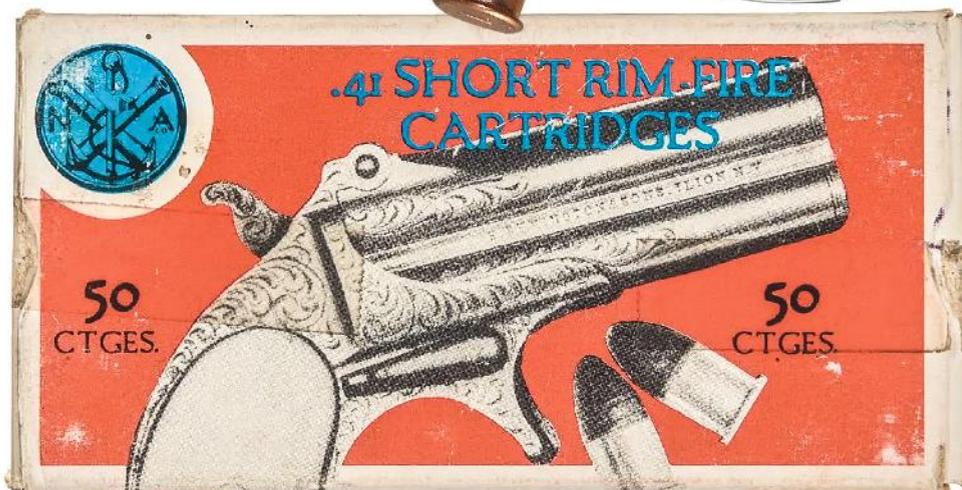
While Henry Deringer never made a pocket revolver, North American Arms has a whole line of them that people have also come

to associate with the term “derringer.” Their smallest pistol, chambered in .22 Short with a 1.125-inch barrel, weighs just 4 ounces. North American Arms even has a model with a folding grip that breaks the gun down into a super tiny package that disappears just

about anywhere you put it.

Of course, if you’re in the market for a more traditional derringer, companies like Dixie Gun Works still make modern reproductions of the original, single-shot, percussion-ignition pistols. You can buy them completed or get them in an unfinished

What we think of today as the **QUINTESSENTIAL** Philadelphia-style derringer came to fruition in 1852.



(Top) Before making pocket pistols, Deringer filled military contracts for arms like the Model 1814. (Above) Bond Arms makes derringers that can fire .410 shotshells. (Left) The Remington Model 95 fired .41 Rimfire cartridges.



kit, putting your own gunsmith skills to the test.

At the end of the day, does it really matter how the word is spelled? To most people, no, but to gun collectors, yes. That capital “D” or an additional “r” can mean the difference of hundreds of dollars when it comes to buying and selling these pocket pistols.

Think about it this way: Would you spend the same

amount of money on a Ford F-150 as you would on a Fard F-160? Of course not! But why not? They’re both pick-up trucks and they look the same and are spelled and sound almost the same, so it’s basically the same thing, right? I know that’s an exaggerated example, but I think it gets the point across about how important something as seemingly insignificant as the spelling of a

word can be to some people.

Regardless of how you spell it, Deringer’s pistols and the generic derivatives have been an incredibly popular part of American arms history. Henry’s diminutive handgun with no patentable or trademarked design would make the name Deringer a household word. Whether or not he’d be upset by the spelling or capitalization, though, is anyone’s guess. ❖

**Deringer’s pistols and the generic derivatives have been an incredibly popular part of AMERICAN ARMS HISTORY.**

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