Uberti 1873 Special Short Sporting Rifle

By Chuck Hawks and Bob Fleck

The basic lever action that B. Tyler Henry designed for the Henry rifle was carried forward into the brass framed Winchester Model 1866 and subsequent steel framed and reinforced Model 1873. The latter is the gun commonly referred to as, "the gun that won the west." That is the rifle that the various Uberti 1873 variations replicate.

The Winchester Model 1873 was in production for many years and available in many variations. Uberti offers four basic versions of their 1873 reproduction, a Carbine (19" round barrel), Short Rifle (20" octagon barrel), Special Sporting Rifle (with 24.25" octagon or half-round barrel), and Special Short Sporting Rifle (20" octagon barrel) that is the subject of this review. The Carbine and Short Rifle have straight hand stocks, while the Sporting Rifle models have semi-pistol grip stocks.

The Uberti 1973 Special Short Sporting Rifle reviewed here comes with a 20" octagon barrel and a checkered semi-pistol grip stock. We feel that this is the pick of the litter, as it is plenty heavy enough to hold well for offhand shooting and balances better than the standard Sporting Rifle with its 24.25" barrel (see photo above.) Available calibers for all Uberti 1873 models include .357 Mag., .38 Special, .44-40, and .45 Long Colt. At one time .32-20 was also cataloged, but it has apparently been dropped.

The .44-40 cartridge was the primary chambering in the Winchester 1873 and would thus be the most authentic choice, but we requested our test rifle in .357 Magnum. We have plenty of .357 Mag./.38 Spec. ammunition on hand and .357 is the flattest shooting and most effective caliber for which the rifle is chambered, while .38 Special is the most economical. Good ammo and plenty of it at reasonable cost makes sense for any rifle.

When it arrived we were all impressed by the good looks of the Special Short Sporting Rifle. The barrel, full-length magazine tube, forend cap, sights, loading gate, action protective cover, lever hook, crescent butt plate, and all screw heads are highly polished and deeply blued. The action body, sideplates, lever, trigger,
and hammer and case colored. The cartridge carrier block is brass. The walnut stock and forend are walnut with a high gloss lacquer finish. There are sizeable checkered panels on the pistol grip and wrap-around checkering on the forend in traditional point patterns. This is a truly handsome rifle of obviously high quality.

Not only is the Special Sporting an exceedingly attractive rifle, it is also very well made and carefully fitted, which we have come to expect from Uberti. It is, in fact, far better made than the .25-35 Winchester Model 94 Trails End Hunter model that we reviewed shortly before Winchester closed their US plant. (You can find that review on the Product Review Page.) The 1873 action is slick and smooth and feeds perfectly with the rifle held in any orientation, including upside down. This is a hallmark of the original Henry action design.

So is a hammer with a traditional quarter-cock safety notch and a high, flaring spur that blocks the shooters view of the sights when uncocked, but makes the rifle extremely easy to cock manually. When cocked, of course, the hammer spur is below the sight line and out of the way.

The only real failing of our test rifle is its extremely heavy trigger pull. The trigger pull measured an incredible 7.5 pounds out of the box on our RCBS Premium gauge and polished itself down to a still very heavy 6.25 pounds with use. The trigger breaks clean without perceptible creep, but it is difficult to shoot tight groups with a trigger this heavy. Uberti needs to correct this major flaw in an otherwise near perfect rifle.

Here are the specifications of the Uberti 1873 Special Short Sporting Rifle:

- Stock number - 342138
- Type - lever action repeater
- Caliber - .357 Magnum/.38 Special (also .44-40, .45 Colt)
- Magazine capacity - 10 rounds
- Barrel length - 20" full octagonal
- Sights - Adjustable buckhorn rear, blade front
- Stock - Checkered walnut semi-pistol grip style with gloss lacquer finish
- Length of pull - 13"
- Overall length - 38.3"
- Weight - 7.8 pounds
- 2007 MSRP - $1085

The operation of the Model 1873 is both interesting and unfamiliar to most modern shooters. Externally it is a traditional lever action rifle, but internally it is quite different from a modern Henry Big Boy, Winchester 94 or Marlin 336.

Instead of a pivoted shell carrier that lifts a fresh cartridge from the magazine and aligns it with the chamber so that the closing bolt will ram it home, the Henry design uses a carrier block that raises and lowers vertically in what is effectively an elevator shaft in the receiver directly behind the breech. This "cartridge elevator" considerably lengthens the receiver, and the design would become unwieldy with a cartridge as long as the .30-30. On the other hand, it works fine with revolver length cartridges and the 1873 action is smoother and faster to operate than a Model 94. Its mainspring is easier to compress when the hammer is thumb cocked, and the large hammer spur gives the thumb more purchase.
No separate ejector is required in the 1873. The rising cartridge carrier block just shoves the fired and extracted case out the open top of the receiver as it raises a new cartridge into alignment with the chamber, regardless of the speed with which the lever is operated. It is interesting to watch fired cases drop onto the shooting table when the lever is operated slowly. Operate the action rapidly and the fired cases are tossed away from the rifle.

B. Tyler Henry’s open top action is also very easy to single load. Just push the finger lever far enough to completely withdraw the breechblock without raising the cartridge carrier and insert a cartridge from the top. Moving the lever rearward to close the breechblock will chamber the cartridge. The 1873 is very user friendly.

To protect the open top action from the entry of rain, snow, or crud a cover is provided that slides on a dovetail machined into the top rear of the receiver. Just manually slide the protective cover forward to seal the action. When the lever is operated the cover will automatically be slid rearward, clear of the ejection port.

Of course, with such a beautiful rifle in hand, we wanted to get it to the range to see how it shoots. So, the day after the 1873 arrived we headed for the Izaak Walton gun range south of Eugene, Oregon. This outdoor facility offers covered shooting benches and target stands at 25, 50, 100, and 200 yards. Bob Fleck and I did the shooting for record.

Since there is no provision for using this rifle with a telescopic sight, we were forced to rely on our middle aged eyes and the supplied iron sights. The latter are good for traditional open sights, with a front blade squared in profile and a square notch at the bottom of the buckhorn rear sight that allows a near Patridge type sight picture.

We tested the Uberti 1873 with factory loaded ammunition that we had on hand. This included Federal American Eagle .357 Mag. with 158 grain JSP bullets, Remington/UMC .357 Mag. with 125 grain JSP bullets, Remington/UMC .38 Special +P with 125 grain SJHP bullets, Winchester/USA .38 Special +P with 125 grain JHP bullets, and standard velocity Remington/UMC .38 Special with 130 grain FMC bullets.

We decided to shoot our groups for record at 25 yards, as we could barely make out the targets at 50 yards, let alone aim at them, with our naked eyes! For targets we chose NRA 25 yard pistol targets with a 5-1/2" black bull’s eye, as these were the most visible targets that we had on hand for use with iron sights.

The winter weather in Western Oregon blessed us with temperatures in the mid-50’s F and mostly cloudy skies with an occasional sun break. The cross wind was maybe 10 knots, and we didn’t figure that it would have much affect on our .357" diameter bullets over the short range involved. The recorded groups consisted of three shots from a mildly warm, but not hot, barrel. We rested the rifle on sandbags. Here are the shooting results at 25 yards:

- .357 Mag. Federal 158 grain JSP - smallest group 3/8"; largest group 1-1/4"; mean average group = 0.88"
- .357 Mag. Rem./UMC 125 grain JSP - smallest group 5/16"; largest group
11/16"; mean average group = 0.53"
- .38 Sp. +P Rem./UMC 125 grain SJHP - smallest group 5/8"; largest group 1-1/8"; mean average group = 0.79"
- .38 Sp. +P Win./USA 125 grain JHP - smallest group 5/16"; largest group 7/8"; mean average group = 0.67"
- .38 Spec. Rem./UMC 130 grain FMC - smallest group 9/16"; largest group 1"; mean average group = 0.83"

AVERAGE 25 YARD GROUP SIZE FOR ALL LOADS TESTED = 0.74"

Simply out of curiosity, and basically stoked by our unexpectedly good results at 25 yards, we fired some 5-shot groups at 50 yards (at visually very blurry targets). For this we used the standard velocity Rem./UMC .38 Special loads with 130 grain FMC bullets and the Winchester .38 Special +P loads with 125 grain JHP bullets. Here are the shooting results at 50 yards.

- .38 Sp. +P Win./USA 125 grain JHP - smallest group 13/16"; largest group 1-5/8"; mean average group = 1.22"
- .38 Spec. Rem./UMC 130 grain FMC - smallest group 3/4"; largest group 2-1/4"; mean average group = 1.67"

AVERAGE 50 YARD GROUP SIZE FOR ALL LOADS TESTED = 1.45"

We were both very pleasantly surprised by what we consider to be these excellent results. Even with the Uberti's ultra-heavy trigger we both shot groups better than we should have given the fact that, visually, we were shooting at a blurry target with blurry sights. Bob and I tied for the luckiest (smallest) group at 5/16" at 25 yards in this contest between half-blind geezers.

Someone with good eyes should be able to shoot 5-shot groups averaging about 3" at 100 yards with this rifle, which is deadly shooting with iron sights. An enormous number of deer and other game fell to 1873 Winchester rifles in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, and now we understand why.

Fortuitously, the rear sight was set correctly in its dovetail for windage, and we found that the second step on the rear sight’s elevation slider printed groups that averaged about 1" high at 50 yards from a sandbag rest with the .38 Special loads tested.

This Uberti 1873 Special Short Sporting Rifle is just a hoot to shoot. Needless to say, recoil is practically non-existent in such a relatively heavy rifle shooting pistol cartridges. Just watching the cartridge carrier block raise and lower vertically like a miniature elevator as the action is operated is worth the price of admission. If you’ve never owned an 1860 Henry, 1866 Winchester, or 1873 Winchester model rifle, you owe it to yourself to get a Uberti replica and find out what you’ve been missing.

By modern standards the 1873 is basically a plinker or a tool for cowboy action shooting, although it could serve very nicely as a home defense rifle if called into play during an emergency. It is handy, accurate, shoots fast and holds a lot of cartridges. In addition, it can be reloaded without taking it out of action. 1873 carbines and rifles were beloved for those very characteristics on the Western frontier, where they were used to protect plenty of homesteads and save many
lives. This Uberti replica is perfectly capable of doing the same today.

RIFLE REVIEW SUMMARY

- **Make and Model:** Uberti 1873 Special Short Sporting Rifle
- **Type:** Classic rifle reproduction
- **Action:** Lever, repeater
- **Stock:** European walnut with checkered pistol grip and forend
- **Caliber Reviewed:** .357 Magnum/.38 Special
- **Best Features:** Very smooth action; Controlled feed--will function in any orientation; Color cased steel receiver; Large capacity magazine; Octagon barrel; Excellent finish and workmanship; Easy to load magazine; Easy to single load; Fast repeat shots, Decent iron sights; Very accurate
- **Worst Features:** Heavy trigger pull; Not drilled and tapped for scope mounts or receiver sights; High price
- **Overall Grade:** A- (Excellent)