The first gun issued by the Winchester Repeating Arms Co., Model 1866, had power, range and a repeating action suitable for hunting animals and human beings.

“Believe me,” gushed Army Maj. H.G. Litchfield, one of the first to use it, “this gun will make the land safe for the frontiersman and will have a great effect on settling the land.”

Seven years later, Model 1873 earned the nickname “The Gun That Won the West,” allegedly killing more game, more American Indians and “more United States soldiers when the Indians awoke to its virtues, than any other type of rifle.” The rifle starred in the 1950 film “Winchester 73,” which featured actor James Stewart in a 1-of-1,000 shooting match.

In “The Winchester,” Laura Trevelyan, a correspondent for the BBC, author of “A Very British Family” and descendant of Winchesters, tells the story of America’s famous firearm and the rise and fall of an arms dynasty.

Trevelyan is at her best providing biographical sketches of her ancestors: Oliver Winchester, the farm boy and shirt manufacturer who founded the company; Tom Bennett, Oliver’s son-in-law, who expanded the Winchester empire; and eccentric Sarah Winchester, Oliver’s daughter-in-law, who built Mystery House, a sprawling mansion in the Santa Clara, California, valley, with 160 rooms, one of them for séances.

Trevelyan also tries to explain why the company faltered and failed. Orders poured in during World War I, she acknowledges, but attributes the company’s crisis to the illness of Winchester Bennett, Tom’s son; the high costs of raw materials and labor; the stringent requirements for the manufacture of rifles set by foreign governments; the loans incurred to expand the physical plant; and the postwar problem of what to do with surplus capacity. Lacking access (apparently) to Winchester’s business records, she doesn’t make clear why the U.S. government’s guarantee of a 10 percent profit did not buffer the company, why dividends were not issued during the war and why Winchester reorganized before the end of the war.
The company limped on, trying to diversify by selling refrigerators, washing machines, ice skates and other products, before going into receivership in 1931. Acquired by the Western Cartridge Co., a former competitor, for a paltry $3 million in cash and $4.8 million in preferred stock, Winchester became Winchester-Western. Managed by the Olin Corp., it stuck to the manufacture and sale of guns, and became profitable again. And during World War II, Winchester produced guns, ammunition, cabin heaters and engine cooling radiator for fighter planes.

But, Trevelyan writes, “the glory days were gone.” In 2006, in response to declining rifle sales, the Winchester firearms factory in New Haven, Connecticut, was closed. It is now an apartment building, Winchester Lofts, with a billiard room, a pet-grooming station and 32 units reserved for affordable housing.

The Winchester Repeating Arms Co. lives on as part of the Herstal Firearms Group, while Olin still owns Winchester Ammunition. As for the descendants of Oliver Winchester, Trevelyan reports that “none of us is in the gun business.”

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