

THE FN STORY - BY RICHARD J. NEMEC

FIREARMS technology advanced at a rapid pace during the latter part of the 19th Century. The transition from black to smokeless gun powder combined with the ability to mass-produce interchangeable parts helped usher in the modern age of riflery. Liege, Belgium has long been associated with the arms industry. In 1888, the Belgian army decided to replace their obsolete rifles and rearm with the Mauser Model 1889 rifle. The Mauser factory in Oberndorf, Germany could not manufacture them soon enough and neither could any single Liege arms maker. A syndicate of Liege gun makers resolved this problem. The idea of combining their resources and starting a new company meant that Belgians, in their own factory, could manufacture the weapons. Fabrique National d'Arms de Guerr S.A. (*Translation: National Factory for Military Arms or simply FN*) was incorporated on July 3, 1889. The location selected was Herstal, a suburb of Liege. On July 12, 1889, FN was awarded the contract to supply the War Department with 150,000 clip loading, magazine rifles. The Mauser firm received royalties. FN successfully fulfilled its first military contract on schedule in 1894, and quickly began manufacturing cartridges for those rifles.

In 1897, American firearms inventor John Browning met Hart Berg, a FN representative who was visiting the United States. Fabrique Nationale needed new products and Mr. Browning had just designed a new handgun. Mr. Browning's prototype was immediately sent to Belgium for evaluation and a partnership between the two was formalized. This collaboration resulted in the Model 1900 automatic pistol. In 1902, Mr. Browning traveled to Europe and granted FN a license to manufacture the Browning A-5 automatic shotgun. In 1907, FN acquired the exclusive right to use Browning as a factory trademark. In rapid succession millions of Browning patent pistols, rifles, shotguns and machine guns were sold worldwide. In 1926, after 60 trans-Atlantic crossings, John Browning died at the FN plant while perfecting his Superposed shotgun and a high capacity pistol that evolved into the "Browning High Power."

The Great Depression and two world wars would test the resilience of FN. In 1914,

Germany invaded Belgium. Company management responded by closing the factory and stockholders sequestered the corporation. After the armistice, firearms production resumed. WW II was quite a different story. Nazi Germany commandeered the plant. Under the direction of DWM, Fabrique Nationale was forced to supply munitions to the German army. Severely damaged by bombing, the FN factory was quickly rebuilt. In 1945, FN received a contract to recondition all U.S. small arms in Europe.

Numerous post WW II conflicts and the shooting sport industry-required firearms of all descriptions. FN was structured to accommodate the demand. In 1971, the company changed its name to Fabrique Nationale Herstal. When the Cold War ended, FN received a contract to make M16A 2 rifles for U.S. army. In 1981, they built a new plant in Columbia, South Carolina. Currently, FNH-USA is dedicated to government contract work and provides 70% of the arms used by the U.S. military. In 1986, FN acquired an interest in U.S. Repeating Arms. That same year, FN Browning became the exclusive worldwide distributor of Winchester trademarked arms. In 1988, it became the sole owner of Browning U.S.A. The only component in FN's legacy that remains unchanged is their commitment to excellence.

My experience with Fabrique Nationale spans four decades. Recently, I had the good fortune to acquire a FN Patrol Bolt Rifle XP. It's built on a pre-64 Model 70 style action. Originally introduced by Winchester in January 1937, as a sporting rifle, FN refined and re-configured this time-tested design into an incredibly accurate tactical rifle. Chambered in .308 Win and equipped with a factory mounted optics rail, 30 mm FN rings and a mill-spec scope, my rifle consistently shoots ½" MOA groups. Colonel Townsend Whelen would have been proud to own this "Rifleman's Rifle."

In closing, I wish to sincerely thank Bob Ailes of FNH-USA for his assistance and the OGCA for their gracious hospitality.

Acknowledgement: "FN – Browning, Armorer to the World"



Richard Nemeec (right) with Jim Swansiger delighted members with this great display of FN rifles and memorabilia at the September 20-21 OGCA meeting.



A couple of favorites from the display



Outstanding poster art included in the display.



The September 20-21 exhibit included some beautiful cased firearms by FN.

