

John Browning Biography

John Browning

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Contents

John Browning Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3



Biography

Born in Ogden, Utah, John Browning spent most of his formative years in his father's gunsmith shop, where he made his first rifle out of scrap iron at the age of thirteen.

In 1879, Browning received his first patent for a single-shot rifle that was loaded from the rear rather than from the muzzle. The Winchester Repeating Arms Company was so impressed with this weapon that they paid Browning large royalties to produce it. He then invented a lever-action repeating rifle and shotgun for Winchester, introduced in 1884. In 1888, Browning designed a pump-action shotgun that was more advantageous for the hunter.

Browning soon turned his attention to automatic weapons. The Gatling machine gun (patented in 1862 by Richard Jordan Gatling), was the dominant automatic weapon of the era; it was a rapid-fire gun powered by a hand-operated crank. Browning attempted to find a way of using expanding gases and recoil from exploding ammunition to eject, reload, and fire weapons automatically. From 1889 to 1892, he experimented on the machine gun, finally creating a crude weapon that captured the gases at the muzzle. In 1895, Browning improved the gun by diverting the gases from a hole drilled in the back of the barrel. The resulting weapon was used in the Spanish-American War as well as in the Boxer Rebellion in China. Browning was also able to employ the same principle for a semi-automatic pistol that became the standard military sidearm for the United States in 1911. A later variation of a heavy machine gun designed by Browning was used aboard United States military aircraft, having the ability of firing at the rate of 1,200 shots per minute. In 1918, Browning's machine gun was pronounced the finest in the world: it was water-cooled, mounted on a tripod, and weighed thirty-six pounds. During one test, this weapon was fired continuously for forty-eight minutes. Browning's success with automatic weapons carried over to the sporting arms industry. For example, he developed an automatic shotgun and rifle, as well as a double-barreled shotgun with the two barrels arranged vertically.

No design of Browning's had ever proved to be a failure. He invented more successful firearms than any other American: today, there are over thirty million modern weapons which are based on his designs. One measure of Browning's phenomenal success is the fact that no fundamental changes have appeared in the firearms industry since his death in 1926.