



GunDigest

BUY & SELL GUNS ONLINE

Avoid the Pitfalls
of Online Gun
Buying



BY Jim Thompson

GUNS ONLINE

Avoiding the Quicksand, Pitfalls, and Nervous Breakdowns of Buying and Selling Guns Online.



Over the course of about eight years, I purchased and sold about 40 Bulgarian Makarovs, but this shot is the captured history of a small error. There is brown leather chaff in the thumb grooves of the slide. This was sometimes interpreted as rust. It's a fine, honest photo, but I had to retake the picture, after using a toothbrush and pipe cleaner to get the leather out of the striations on both sides. The pistol was then kept wrapped in sheet plastic and shipped that way.

This discussion is not a rule book for online auctions. Each site will have its own, but, whether one is buyer or a seller, there are some “rules of the road” more imperative than the protocols and terms of service of particular sites.

The first unwritten construct is “Stay on the road!” That is, one is there to buy or sell or both, and any frustrated schoolteacher buried deep in one’s DNA is never going to be very productive in the world of commerce. It is imperative to use and impart knowledge on the merchandise in question, but the very instant that process or any similar impulse becomes a goal, then the meaningful goals of enterprise are being defeated.

Way back in the ’70s, long before home computers, cell phones, and the Internet, there was a buy-and-sell circular/newspaper for camera buffs and photographers called *Shutterbug Ads*. Prefacing all the classified listings was an admonition to readers. I no longer

have a copy, but it was a priceless piece of logic and psychology that we all know, and only a few refuse to acknowledge. It went something like this:

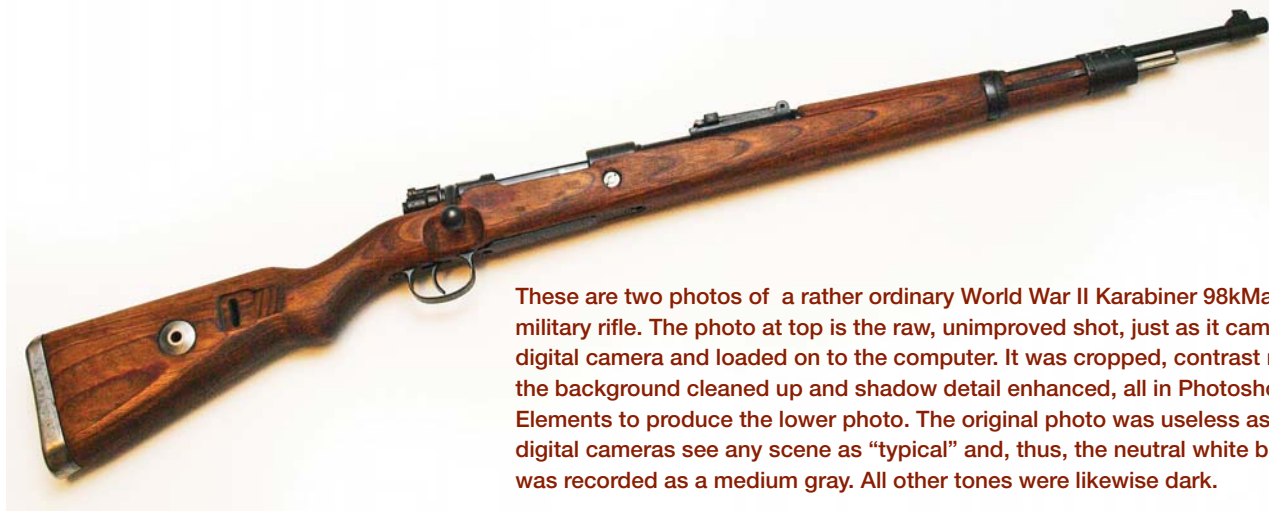
There are some people to whom commerce is an incomprehensible Gordian knot. Everything bought or sold is an abstract confusion of hatreds, paranoia, conspiracies, and problems. These folks work hard to make their own lives and those of everyone with whom they do business an endless misery. Every transaction to the chronic malcontent is studded with “buyer’s remorse” and/or “seller’s regret,” and unreliable to deranged information/misinformation/disinformation is used to further fuel a complex of problems entirely self-generated. If you are one of them, you’ve heard about it. It is strongly suggested if that is so, you not even endeavor to do business here. We will not brook your problems or support your delusions, fantasies, and hatred.

I was never able to find out if that language (and my version may be somewhat

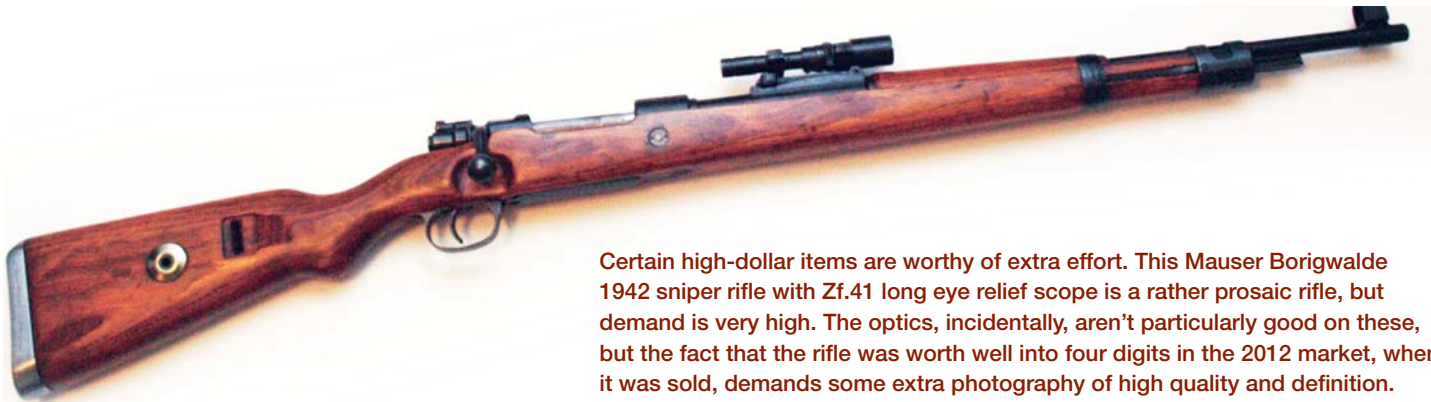
stronger than the original), originated with Glenn Patch, the original publisher, but, in those days, I was a commercial and sometime portrait photographer doing large-format work for markets all over the planet, and I needed to buy optics, even cameras sometimes, for specific jobs, then get rid of them quickly, and a national market was required to do so efficiently. I couldn’t do it in a town of 50,000, and I doubt it would’ve worked even in New York City. But it did work nationally.

That brings me to Rule No. 2 of avoiding problems in any arena of commerce, and that is “Do not try to do business with those whose agenda has nothing to do with yours.”

Very early on, before beginning my own online commerce adventures, I was advised by an old hand who had sold collector’s items on eBay for years, that, “Anyone who seems crazy, just presume he is. If his question is deranged, is based on false information he got from



These are two photos of a rather ordinary World War II Karabiner 98k Mauser military rifle. The photo at top is the raw, unimproved shot, just as it came from my digital camera and loaded on to the computer. It was cropped, contrast modified, the background cleaned up and shadow detail enhanced, all in Photoshop Elements to produce the lower photo. The original photo was useless as it was. All digital cameras see any scene as “typical” and, thus, the neutral white background was recorded as a medium gray. All other tones were likewise dark.



Certain high-dollar items are worthy of extra effort. This Mauser Borigwalde 1942 sniper rifle with Zf.41 long eye relief scope is a rather prosaic rifle, but demand is very high. The optics, incidentally, aren't particularly good on these, but the fact that the rifle was worth well into four digits in the 2012 market, when it was sold, demands some extra photography of high quality and definition.

some other fool, or is offensive, block him as a bidder, block his e-mail if you can and, if it's far-out enough to be threatening, report it to the web administrators at the auction site or forum. Mostly, the message services are for expediting sales and, if it's an attack, especially a crazy one, he should be banned!" This is a prudent policy.

By the way, none of this is anything new. Gun shows harbor many of the same "aisle experts," who pontificate on subjects about which they know little to nothing and who can be relied upon to produce nothing but confusion and anger (though sometimes we can get a laugh from them, too). For the most part, they are not customers, sellers, or even potentially so, and it is often downright dangerous to do business with such

folks. Those of us old enough to remember encountered them 50 years ago and more. The only difference is that, in the current electronics age, they aren't close enough to hit and have the additional protection of anonymity. In other words, a few "mouth cruisers" will attack just to attack. Others are looking for responses via e-mail and would be more than glad to inflict more balderdash or even malicious viruses upon their victims.

Still, the advantages of online buying and selling are such that entering the arena is productive, and it can be fun. I haven't been to a gun show in four years, and can't now think of a reason to go. Nor have I been to an old-fashioned, in-person auction for about six years (frankly, most of what I have seen change hands at such events in half a century in

this business has been overpriced and, often, mis-described).

Just as with gun shows and live auctions, a key rule to self-protection as a buyer or seller online is very simple. Call it Rule No. 3, or knowing that "avoiding the 'valid' literature of the items that interest you is always going to benefit you." This is the old "knowledge is power" cliché come home to roost.

The first corollary of this rule should be obvious: The stuff one hears casually, whether online, in bars, from winos sleeping in gutters, or phony baloney "experts" at gun shows, is worth a great deal less than what is paid for it. The only way to know what's real and what's not is if the genuine experts verify that snippet you think you know. Second, of course, and especially if you're selling expensive items, remember to admit you actually don't know that of which you are not sure.

A case in point. Recently, I had a very nice L.C. Smith 10-gauge (circa 1890), consigned to me by a retired friend. It was a Number 3 engraved. It took months of snooping and digging to verify the engraving pattern. During that time, I got several e-mails from "experts" telling



While they're a sort of boogie man to some of the anti-gun crowd, Chinese semiautomatic AK-47 clones from the pre-ban era are very valuable. This mint, unfired specimen, with box and instructions, went for several thousand dollars, in early 2012.



Small nuances, such as the unusual sights on this Swedish Model 1896 club target rifle, have to be emphasized and photographed in detail to sell effectively in the electronic arena.



This Springfield M1 Garand and Remington Model 1903 were sold at the same time, on the same auction site. Neither was original, as both had many late match features added by first-quality civilian 'smiths. This is the same photo below, but the contrast was suppressed to match the other photography. Both rifles, while in some ways historic, would find their real market with shooters, and such an auction should specify that.



me it was misidentified. They were wrong. From several of the country's leading Smith collectors, I had verified the engraving pattern, basic features, markings, and so on. Only 90 of these guns were ever made, but the barrel was an odd length. The experts saw the photos and were about evenly divided. Two said they were "pretty sure," based upon several detailed muzzle shots, that it was a custom-length gun. Two said that, while it didn't seem to have been cut by an amateur, it was most likely not a factory job, either. I included all the photos, sold it on Auction Arms (now called GunAuction.com), and, basically,

stated flatly that the buyer should draw his own conclusions about the barrel length, because I didn't know.

The best literature in my research of this gun proved to be an e-mailed scanned copy of an 1890 catalog, very kindly sent to me by a collector who did so out of pure magnanimity. It listed the standard lengths, then said, at the bottom, that a customer could order "any desired length" in the Number Three.

This example could reasonably constitute the second corollary to Rule No. 3, that being, "If you don't know what you don't know, don't just admit it, say it in so many words!"

There's a third corollary, closely related, that makes for good seller's auctions and which helps buyers sort out the pieces and the information: "If you're aware of a rumor that seems to have some credibility or creates some interest, it is often wise to pass it on as amusing chit-chat, but be sure to identify it as a rumor." Sometimes, these things prove, in the long run, to be hogwash or hyperbole. Other times, they are proven to be correct. Most often, they live on as what amounts to gun gossip.

The same goes for the undocumented tales that often accompany individual firearms. As this is written, my online



Unusual combinations require explanation. This is an authentic U.S. Model of 905E1 bayonet with two scabbards, one genuine, but with an added tip gusset, the other a rather nice reproduction. In the copy, I had to explain that I needed the bayonet for a book photo, but it had to look as it might have in 1943 or so, and the gusset was a later strengthening addition. Interestingly, the shot finally selected didn't use the scabbard at all. Notice the use of type text right on the graphics. A surprising percentage of shoppers online do not read auctions, but will read the captions right on the photo frames.

original scabbard

original bayonet in replica scabbard

array of firearms across 47 auctions includes a German K98k that was supposedly an escapee with its soldier or Volkspolizei trooper, from East Germany, back in the 1950s or early 1960s. If it had arrived carrying a post-1985 import mark, I'd have never even relayed these tidbits. However, the very dark oxide finish is like those on rifles and some handguns that came out of East Germany, when that nation ceased to exist in the early '90s. So, too, is the oddly detailed renumbering system used on the parts details. Though I cannot verify the yarn, and even though it is not in any way used to inflate the price, it is passed forward as another sort of rumor in the auction.

Most of these details are much simpler with pieces that are solely shooters. Right now, among the guns I have at auction, are a Ruger M77 and an EAA Baikal 7x57R/12-gauge over/under, as well as a number of sheerly practical handguns.

Whether shooters' or collectors' items, and including parts, there's a fourth rule that ought to be observed by sellers and intensely watched for by potential purchasers: "If there's a stamped proof mark, inspector's mark, serial number, or other detail that even

might be important, photograph it and include it in the auction. This can make a rather large difference. I just sold several Winchester-marked M1 Garand clips for \$25 to \$40 each, and the "WRA" stamping is what distinguished mine from the more mundane types, typically worth, at this writing, about a dollar each.

There are folks with elaborate tales used to justify the exclusion or obscuration of serial numbers. Some sellers, likewise, avoid showing various other markings. Thing is, if one is interested

in doing business, the serial number is the only way to establish the background of a piece, and that includes date of manufacture, whether stolen or not and, in some cases, its actual history. Our U.S. government-issue M1 Garands, as an example, end their numbering sequence not far beyond six million. Those with numbers over seven million are cast-receiver clones made by the commercial firm Springfield Armory, Incorporated, and have never seen military service of any kind. The



Essential markings must be shown on original pieces. This very thin, light stamping is on a wartime Enfield Number 4 Mark I, from 1942.



This is a cleaned up, generic shot of a duo-code, World War II BRNO/Waffenfabrik Brunn K98k rifle. But even this shot shows some small reflection from my walnut cabinet in the butt plate area, and some viewers might construe that as rust—which is a good reason to avoid as much in the way of extraneous reflection as possible in auction photography. With very expensive items, I often tent the camera area with white carding or sheets.

real U.S. Armory, of course, was in Massachusetts, whereas Springfield Arms, Inc., is located in Illinois.

I've been utilizing online auctions for more than five years on two sites, Auction Arms (gunauction.com) and GunBroker. As of the day this summary is composed, I have more than 1,200 A+ positive feedbacks—just on those two! These are true auction sites. There are others I have used, and there is also GunsAmerica, which is a flat-price firearms dealing site. On the two sites I use most regularly, I have a grand total of three neutral and two negative feedbacks.

Feedback makes the system run. Neither site will even admonish individuals for false or misleading feedback, which, of course, also involves the buyer's remorse (or buyer's embarrassment) kinds of comments so common to those who are pathologically incapable of following the rules. Those who do this to me are blocked instantly and, for the record, I always file complaints, even knowing nothing will be done based upon one

complaint to me. Ultimately, two of these parties were banned from the auction sites in question as chronic troublemakers and one as an out-and-out charlatan.

I got my first Federal Firearms License about 1967. I've had my current one since about 1985. On modern firearms transactions, individuals without FFLs must usually receive a firearm through a licensed dealer. Collectors may acquire a Curios and Relics license, which is not a full dealer's license, but does imbue them with some shipping and receiving latitude. Anyone can buy or sell on an auction site, though with those legal loopholes and local laws properly satisfied. Some FFL dealers will not accept firearm shipments from individuals outside their areas. The law allows them to do so, if ID and so on is provided, but many have been burned, in various ways, by untrustworthy individuals.

Online gun auctions are very much like live auctions having an audience and bidders, wherein the website becomes the auctioneer. Some sellers

will use a hidden reserve as a minimum binding bid. No one I know personally will bid on a reserve auction or even ask a seller a question. This is learned fairly early. A very few sellers are experimenters of dubious virtue who will set a downright absurd reserve, simply to see if there is someone on the planet foolish enough to pay it. Some will attempt to haggle, if the reserve is not met. Others will reduce the reserve somewhat and move on. A very few—basically, opportunists—will simply fold their auctions and look for suckers elsewhere.

Most auctions feature a fixed minimum bid, wherein lower figures will not even be recorded. Most commonly, these are accompanied by a "buy it now" price. If a bidder opts for the "buy it now," the auction is over, that bidder has won, and a billing can thus be sent.

When a "buy it now" price is not listed, once a minimum bid has been placed, the auction will continue for its stated period, usually seven or 14 days



This all-steel, original wartime P38 was shown with a reproduction German World War II, Nazi era Kriegsmarine Model 1935 helmet, partly for eye appeal and window dressing, but also because it allowed the manipulation of the pistol to stand up against a dark object, at an angle, which is always a more interesting photo than a straight-on "mug shot." As always, it is necessary to specify that only the pistol is for sale.



Unusual inclusions in an auction need to be explained, in both text and graphics. This Remington M1903 sported a brand new barrel and a CMP-supplied C Target stock and wood, a more commodious arrangement than the scant or straight stocks. The sling was a correct style, but reproduction leather unit, appropriately marked.

and running from Sunday to Sunday (Sunday is the biggest day for closures in the online auction business). The highest bidder at the approximate end is the winner. One has to say “approximate end,” because the biggest players in the industry both have rules whereby a bid extends an auction briefly, usually for 15 minutes, so that lurking potential bidders can counter.

A couple years ago, I had a splendid Browning Hi-Power, a premium Model of 1935 up for bid. On the auction system on GunBroker, I could determine it had more than 30 “watchers.” It was on for many weeks. Finally, just before close and after more than a month, someone made a minimum bid. However, the sale didn’t actually end until the next morning, with far beyond 20 bids at exactly the “buy it now” price.

In that respect, if possible, it is prudent to adjust the bidding dollar interval to higher figures, when a venue allows that control. If this isn’t done, in some circumstances, a bid of a mere 50 cents more will be acceptable, and an auction goes on way too long for most sellers.

The big trick for a buyer is always getting in that first bid; the number of watchers means very, very little. It is not uncommon to note as many as 30 watchers on an item with no bidding activity for months, which is why most sellers put their items on automatic renewal mode. Many watchers are window shopping, some are competitors, some are folks hoping their ship comes in, and a few are just hoping a seller might reduce the minimum bid price.

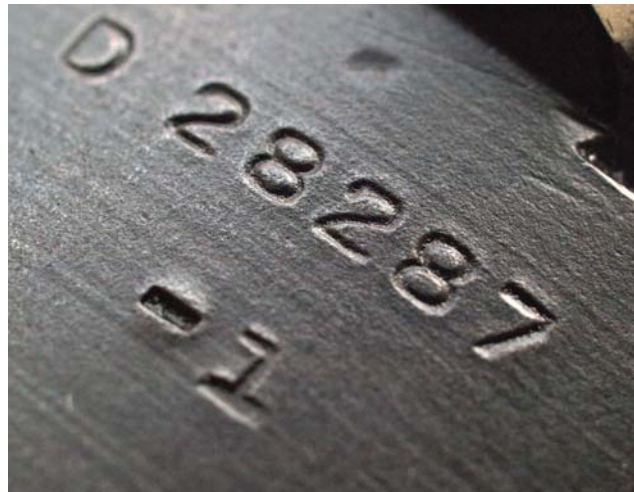
Most adventurous of the sellers are the penny and dollar auction participants. They literally allow binding bids for as little as one cent. And many of them do it on all their merchandise. I

think this may take more courage than I have, but I recently tracked a Navy Luger Model of 1906 that caught my eye, and it got a very high number of bids, winding up selling for about \$3,000. Then, checking the Auction Arms site for penny auctions, I realized most everything the Luger’s seller had posted went for about normal wholesale or above, sometimes far above, and their close rate was much better than mine. Over time, I may dip my toe in that arena, but doing it the very first time is going to take a lot of fortitude.

For 20 years, I was a firearms writer. Now retired, this stuff is at once a hobby and a business. My areas of interest as a writer primarily involved military firearms, but also extended to western firearms, commercial Lugers, and target rifles. I’ve always been a shooter first, everything else second. My first book, from Paladin, in 1989, was *Machine Guns: A Pictorial, Practical and Tactical History*. In 1998, there was *The Complete M1 Garand*. In college, I learned to do hard research with original sources,

and while I neither do nor much enjoy dry, dull, industrial histories, I used to gobble them up like ice cream on a hot day. If one means to enter either end of the online firearms commerce business, even as a hobby, that kind of “hobbyist and student as the boss” is about the only way it can be done. On the selling side, profits are usually not high, but the nightmare of dealing with a completely untrained and uninformed general public is considerably reduced. In my experiences dealing with laymen face to face, selling merchandise that is really the province of the specialist can only be described as annoying and frustrating. Yes, in the online venues, on the buying end, savings can be substantial, though such deals are intermittent. Call this Rule No. 5, and another that applies to everyone: “If you can’t do it properly and by the rules, better to not even try!”

There’s a sixth rule that you can use to quickly figure out what your car or firearm might cost if you had to build it up out of loose parts: “The sum of the sold parts is a whole lot more money than



Another detail shot, well under an inch in real area, showing the original detail parts number marking on a very early M1 Garand bolt. Since it is the marking that defines the age of the gun, not showing them is not merely an error, it is a virtual guarantee a serious collector won’t touch it.

the sold assembly by itself.” Yup! That \$9 extractor, \$75 bolt, the springs—they all add up. Keep in mind that, if one wishes to become a parts merchant, it’s necessary to be able to state whether an item is in working condition, and your statement had best be reliable and correct, because all auction sites have provisions for returning defective items that are not listed as such. Startlingly, both on my own and by consignment from others, I have sold old and even rusted parts, honestly and in detail presented, and satisfied the customers who purchased them. Whether they were doing visual restorations, figured they could restore the items, or simply found damaged miscellany amusing, I do not know. There is always the dim possibility they were treasures I somehow failed to interpret properly. If so, for me there was either profit involved or the need to recapture the space the item consumed, so there are few, if any, second thoughts.

The seventh and final rule is the biggest and most vital, and the one without adherence to which everything else eventually fails. It’s dead simple and very plain: “Photography is everything!”

I had been a practicing photographer for almost 40 years, when I put together my first online auctions. I did them on film, scanned to JPEG files on my computer, and stormed ahead. I did have some misconceptions, at the time I started. For the life of me, I could not understand why an overall configuration shot of a firearm was necessary, especially with a rifle, which requires a long vertical shot, is often hard to light, and which, reduced (especially by GunBroker), offers very little detail. Frankly, I still think such photos are overrated. After all, what person about to buy a \$2,000 competition-quality M1 Garand has no idea what the overall rifle looks like? However, within hours of posting my first auction, I had several e-mails inquiring what the whole rifle looked like. I had included individual shots of both sides, every single parts marking, bolt and sight details, and even a shot of the buttplate, for crying out loud! Right or wrong, I had overall configuration shots on the auction within an hour and have not failed to use them since.

While the photography in the auctions is not as demanding as the double-trucked photo spreads I did for magazine ads back in the ’70s, I still apply a lot of the same principles.

A white or neutral-gray background is easiest to use for most subject matter

and casts no color-distorting reflections. I do sometimes use red, blue, green, or camouflaged backgrounds, but, to eliminate color spillover, usually separate the item from its background.

I use bounced studio flash—not on-camera flash, which is the most useless lighting for this stuff—with about four heads, for most items. This is soft, portrait-like lighting that casts very soft shadows, which I very rarely remove. (There is no such thing as photography without shadows, by the way.)

Tungsten incandescent flood lighting has many drawbacks, of which the heat generated and potential fire and burn issues are just a couple. Hard reflection control is best done with a polarizing filter, and one can even drape polarizing material over the lights for nearly absolute control. Camera stores and their professionals will generally have good advice on lighting and close-up photography that will be very, very helpful.

I would have been content to stay with film, save that during one of my first winters back in the Midwest, I got very annoyed with driving to the photo finisher, then driving back to pay my money and pick up the work a second time. Too,

with as many as a dozen consignment items coming in a typical week, there was a pretty substantial photo finishing bill involved. One particularly ugly set of trips in very heavy snow convinced me to go digital, and the money saved going forward allowed me to purchase PhotoShop Elements 8, my current photo editing software. (It’s good I did, because I immediately discovered my digital camera is convinced that all subject matter is “average” and, thus, photos against my white background are often underexposed. The camera, you see, is convinced that big white hunk of paper is very bright and darkens down the entire frame to compensate.)

Some beginners do their work outdoors, in shade, to avoid the whole studio setup, but that has disadvantages of its own. Working in sunlight generates hard shadows and reflections, especially with nicked, stainless, or high-polished blue surfaces. Years ago, editing an article for a gun magazine, I wondered what the “blue stuff” was on a nice old Colt Single Action. It was the sky! I didn’t bother with it on the transparency back



Rough textures, damage, pitting, missing parts, and so on need to be illustrated. This rare WIN-13 M1 Garand receiver still has strong markings, but shows evidence of corrosion on the outside surfaces. Not to show this would have resulted in a very angry response from any purchaser, and rightly so. Somewhat unusually, and the reverse of common encounters, the rifle was very clean in the areas under the wood, and even the bottom of the trigger housing was free from pitting.

This shot of a near-mint Enfield Model of 1914 in .303 is a useful lead shot, and it isn't just about the color. It at least strongly implies that the rifle has been fired.



then, since it was a very small detail that, in the end, didn't matter. But the online auction seller is prudent to present his treasures as objectively as possible, and extraneous reflections and backgrounds can only detract.

The key rule in photography of this type is to get close, followed shortly by get closer. My auctions for firearms typically include 15 to 40 photos; on high-dollar items, 60 or 70 is not uncommon. With rare exceptions, every shot goes through editing to enhance the images and eliminate background flaws, color cast, and just generally present the most complete and honest image of the merchandise that can be shown in the space provided.

By the way, both big auction sites "shrink" your images, but it is singularly unwise to shoot at low pixel levels. Shooting at 1 MG or better is not strictly necessary, and half that (500 kb) will provide suitable images. But 100 kb will show on GunBroker not much bigger than a postage stamp, and it's a picture that, for practical purposes, is not worth taking. Auction Arms shrinks images much less; for certain commercial items with a lot of detail, I will often use that site, simply because the picture can be more reliably read. The photos with this article should provide some illustration of the difference between raw and edited images. Lousy photos are lousy photos and are often regarded as a form of deception, so using yours in their unedited form is singularly unwise.

To purchasers, a little advice: on an expensive item, where there are too few pictures, lousy photos, and not much visual information, don't bother asking for more. It may be an attempt to deny information or deceive, but it's more likely the seller simply doesn't care enough to develop good images and, therefore, there is no point bidding.

To sellers, this wisdom: If the pictures aren't bright and sharp, big enough, or plentiful enough, there can be a world of apathy or hurt just around the corner.

Acquiring photo software and learning how to use it is absolutely essential, if online auction selling is to be a major part of one's hobby or income. It is a money-making tool that very quickly pays for itself. There is some free photo software out there that will allow cropping, which is very important, and some lightening and darkening, but most of it is very slow to use and limiting. I have not used all of them, but all I have used were far too rudimentary. Remember, an online seller is competing with professionals and manufacturers, who have seasoned professionals taking their firearms photos.

More than five years ago now, I took my first big consignment, and the seller saw the auction online. "Why so many pictures?" he asked.

"I have to show everything I can," I responded.

"It isn't necessary!"

That was a few hours before the

flashy M1 sold later that day for about \$1,500, the "buy it now" price. The same consignee now says, "There is no such thing as too many photos!" I am inclined to agree.

There are some ethical considerations that aren't rules, just mechanisms used to sort things out. For example, many of us consider it unethical, in response to potential bidders using the message systems to request "extra photos," to furnish shots that are not ultimately put in the auction. In fact, the last couple dozen such requests I have gotten were asking for photos that were already in the auction, and in some numbers—some people don't know how to scroll down! Others don't wait for all the photos to load. And guess what? If you send them a 2 MG file, they won't know how to read that, either, since it will more than fill up the screen (if they can figure out how to open it).

I was heartened a couple years ago, when a friend was looking at one of my guns, took it under a stronger light, but still couldn't see all the inspector's marks he was attempting to view. He then signed on his computer and looked at the auction.

"You know," he said, "I can see it better online than I can in person!"

That, of course, is the way the whole thing is supposed to work.



All About Shipping Guns

How to navigate the rules of three popular shipping companies. Hint: It can be done.

MY EDITORS HAVE BEEN hearing from some readers who are running into trouble when attempting to ship a firearm they sold through GdTM. These are non-licensed individuals who might be shipping only a gun or two, not dealers. Seems they are being refused service or given incorrect information when attempting to ship through the US Post Office, or a common carrier such as UPS or Fed Ex. Since I ship several firearms every week, I was asked to provide some information on the legal ways to ship firearms. What follows is not legal advice and is provided as information only. If you are going to ship any firearms, I urge you to verify this information at the sources.

The first things a gun shipper needs to know are the Federal rules regarding the inter-state shipment of firearms. Rather than cut and paste a bunch of legalese from a BATFE website, I will attempt to give a basic outline. The government regulations state that only an FFL (Federal Firearms License) holder may receive firearms in inter-state shipment. This is when shipping a firearm from one state to another. If a firearm is being shipped within a single state, or intra-state, the rules are a bit different. Shipping a firearm within a state does not require the involvement of an FFL holder, unless there are state regulations governing private sales of firearms.

The sender does not need to have an FFL to ship a firearm to an FFL holder. However, some FFLs refuse to receive a firearm from a non-FFL shipper. That is their own policy, not backed up by the regulations. It is suggested that a non-FFL shipping a firearm to an FFL holder include a copy of their ID or drivers license. The receiving FFL must have this information to enter the firearm in their records. I have had

transfer firearms show up with nothing to indicate who sent it beyond a return address on the box.

If an unlicensed person is shipping a firearm they need to verify that the person or business they are shipping to has a valid FFL. This can be done by getting a signed copy of the recipient FFL mailed or faxed to the sender. Be aware that you might run across a dealer who refuses to provide a copy of their FFL if they are receiving the firearm from a non-licensee. Not a problem if they will give their license number to check on the BATFE website at a page called FFL EZ check. This is the best way to verify that an FFL is current, whether you have a mailed copy or just an FFL number. Try www.atfonline.gov/fflez-check/ Just type in the FFL numbers and it will display the shipping address and date the license expires. The EZ check site does not work to verify Curio and Relic type 03 licenses. The C&R information is not considered public, while regular dealer FFLs are. You must get a signed copy mailed to you from any C&R FFL holder.

Other Federal requirements are that the package containing a firearm NOT contain any markings indicating the contents and that the package require an adult signature at time of delivery. There is no Federal requirement that the shipper be notified that the package contains a firearm if it is being sent to an FFL.

Muzzle loading firearms and antique firearms made before Jan. 1, 1899, are exempt from Federal regulation. They can be shipped freely, unless in violation of state law.

Now we see that it is legal under Federal law for an un-licensed individual to ship a firearm to an FFL address. The problems come up when uninformed clerks refuse to

accept the firearm presented for shipment. Or they add their own rules to make it impossible to comply. This can happen at any shipping venue. Most of the time it is due to ignorance of their own rules and fear of firearms. The only thing one can do is ask to speak to the clerks' supervisor. Ask to see the relevant regulations in the shipping rules, or tariff. Having your own copy of these rules and the recipients' FFL copy can sometimes help. Just remember, even though you know you are in compliance with the regulations, you can not force a reluctant shipper to accept any package.

USPS

Non-licensed individuals can ship rifles or shotguns to any FFL location. Just be sure there is no ammunition included in the package. It is against USPS regulations to mail ANY ammunition at any time. The postal clerk will ask if there is anything liquid, fragile or hazardous in the package. As long as there is no ammunition in the box, you can answer no to this question. An unloaded long gun poses no threat to any freight handlers or truck drivers.

Handguns can only be sent by an FFL holder to an FFL holder. A postal form PS 1508 is filed with each handgun shipment where the sender certifies that they and the recipient are FFL licensed dealers, manufacturers or importers. Because the wording on the PS-1508 does not specifically mention C&R it has been assumed that USPS does not recognize a C&R FFL for the purpose of mailing handguns. In fact, the term curio & relic or C&R never appears in any official USPS document. I think it was omitted because they were hardly ever used when the PS-1508 system was devised. It might be nice if someone could get an official opinion on this. Many postmasters

have never dealt with firearms shipments. My local USPS folks have actually called me when a customer came in asking questions about gun shipping. A violation of Postal service rules concerning firearms could be considered a Federal crime with all the nasty results that can involve.

My USPS notes: USPS would be my first choice for a non-licensee to ship a long gun. Shipping a firearm with insurance will require the receiver to sign for it when delivered. This satisfies the signature requirement. However, I recommend also adding the return receipt card. This post card is signed by the recipient and then mailed back to the shipper. If you need to ship a handgun it might be a good idea to ask a local FFL holder to ship it for you. Even with paying an FFL for his time to ship, USPS will cost less than UPS or Fed Ex which require handguns be sent next day air. Some dealers will do this. Some will not.

United Parcel Service

The following is taken directly from the UPS web site: "Special Procedures for Shipping Firearms

Firearms will be transported only between licensed importers, licensed manufacturers, licensed dealers, and licensed collectors, as defined in the United States Gun Control Act of 1968, law enforcement agencies of the United States or of any department or agency thereof and law enforcement agencies of any state or department agency, or political subdivision thereof, and between persons not otherwise prohibited from shipping firearms by federal, state or local law and when such shipment complies with all applicable federal, state and local laws. You must ship your packages that contain handguns with UPS Next Day Air Early A.M., UPS Next Day Air, or UPS Next Day Air Saver services. Your packages that contain firearms will not be accepted for shipment at UPS Drop Boxes, with UPS SonicAir service, at locations of The UPS Store or any third-party retailer, or with international services.

Your packages that contain handguns must be separated from other packages being delivered to UPS. Ammunition cannot be included in your packages that contain firearms (including handguns)

When you are shipping your package

that contains a firearm with UPS, you must affix a UPS label requesting an adult signature upon delivery.

You can only ship your package that contains a firearm from UPS daily pick-up accounts and through UPS Customer Centers. When you are shipping a package that contains a handgun, you must verbally notify the UPS driver or UPS Customer Center clerk.

See the terms and conditions in the UPS Tariff for shipping firearms." This additional sentence is contained in the UPS tariff: UPS, in its sole discretion, may require the shipper select Next Day Air service for any shipment containing a firearm.

My UPS notes: UPS only accepts firearms at a UPS customer center and this is inconvenient for many people. Customer centers usually are located at the UPS truck terminals where the local drivers are based. That could be a hundred miles or more from some locations. Some UPS employees are interpreting the first sentence in the Shipping Procedures for Firearms document to mean only FFL holders can ship firearms. I think the final clause "and between persons not otherwise prohibited from shipping firearms by federal, state or local law and when such shipment complies with all applicable federal, state and local laws" leaves the door open for non-licensees to ship firearms.

Federal Express

"Federal Express can only accept and deliver firearms between areas served in the U.S. under the following conditions: (1) you agree to tender shipments of firearms to us only when either the shipper or recipient is a licensed manufacturer, licensed importer, licensed dealer or licensed collector and is not prohibited from making such shipments by local, state or federal regulations; (2) the shipper and recipient must be of legal age as identified by applicable state law.

Firearms must be shipped via FedEx Priority Overnight service. FedEx cannot ship or deliver firearms C.O.D. or with a signature release. Upon presenting the package for shipment, the person tendering the shipment to FedEx is required to notify the FedEx employee who accepts the package that the package contains a

firearm. The outside of the package must not be marked, labeled or otherwise identify that the package contains a firearm. Firearms shipments cannot be placed in a FedEx Express Drop Box.

You also agree not to ship loaded firearms or firearms with ammunition in the same package. Ammunition is an explosive and must be shipped separately as dangerous goods. The shipper and recipient are required to comply with all applicable government regulations and laws, including those pertaining to labeling. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives can provide assistance."

I have never shipped a firearm through FedEx. The nearest FedEx office is 50 miles from me. The next day requirement on all guns makes FedEx a costly option for firearm shipments. I have heard they sometimes will want to inspect a firearm to insure it is unloaded. This is a pain if you have already boxed the gun up. Some clerks are even requiring that a firearm be broken down, but I can find nothing about it in their tariff.

Packing Hints

In over 600 firearms shipped since 1998, when I started doing mail order and Internet sales, I have had only seven damaged shipments. All were with UPS, because I use them for most long guns. All damage involved broken stocks. In all cases but one, they paid the insurance claim. I use a 6 x 6 x 48 inch heavy cardboard shipping carton. The gun is put in a padded gun sleeve and foam packing peanuts are used to fill up the empty space in the box. I have had no damage claims since I started using the packing peanuts. Do not use wadded newspapers as packing.

If you are only shipping a few long guns I suggest just buying a plastic hard case with foam padding. These can be had for around \$20 at most Mart marts. Keep the cardboard box the case comes in. Gun in hard case, case in box, tape it up and cross your fingers.

Good luck with your firearm shipping adventure. The situation could get worse. If UPS and FedEx decided to not allow any non-FFL firearms shipments it would leave USPS as the only option. It could happen. **GDTM**

Buying Guns on Internet Auctions

The Internet lets you shop for guns all over the country, here are some tips to make it easier.

IF YOU ARE A COLLECTOR looking for that unique piece or a shooter seeking a deal on a gun that has not been made in fifty years, the Internet auction is replacing the gun show as the place to satisfy your desire. As a dealer, I sell most of my collectible and used firearms via Internet auction. I use both GunBroker and AuctionArms. Both are fine sites that advertise here in the Gun Digest. I did not list eBay here because they do not allow complete firearms of any kind. Some gun parts are allowed but I don't recommend using eBay for any firearm related stuff because they do not want our firearm business. Why put money in the pockets of an anti-gun business?

I have found after a decade of selling firearms on Internet auctions that I can usually sell them quicker and for a better price than locally or at a gun show. There are some risks involved that I will try to address in this column. Is Internet buying for you? The answer can depend on what you are looking for and how much risk are you willing to accept in pursuit or your goal. A bit of money helps, too.

Why buy on the net when I have a great gun shop locally? The answer to this depends on the item you are interested in purchasing. If it is a current production firearm then a local, well-stocked shop is probably your best bet. However, retail shops do not stock every product. Some are even reluctant to order an unfamiliar product instead of selling you something they carry in stock. If you are a collector or just want a specific item, few retail shops will have a large selection of used guns. They just get what comes in the door. So if you want a used .30-06 hunting rifle but live in a shotgun only state, few rifles will get traded in. Some shops might not even want to

take used firearms in trade at all. They don't want to stand behind an item they cannot get serviced or replaced easily. Many retailers of new merchandise are afraid to take in collectible guns like an old Winchester or Colt Single Action because they are not well informed of the collectible market, and they fear getting stuck with an expensive gun that is hard to sell locally. I can't fault them for their caution in buying high priced collectibles. I have bought collectible guns thinking I was getting a good deal only to find out that it had the wrong barrel length, non original rear sight, replaced stock, was reblued, or any of a dozen other problems that reduced its value and collectibility. It pays to know what you are buying.

How do I find an item I want? First, you should log on to one of the auction sites and select the search option. Enter the make, model and caliber of an item you are looking for. Such as: "winchester 1873 .45", "1898 mauser 7mm", or "colt 1903 .32" No need to use caps or punctuation, as the search does not use them. This will show you current listings matching your selection. Hopefully, there are several listings to view. It will also be helpful to do another search of closed auctions to see prices that were actually realized on your item. Do a closed auction search going back as far as the site will allow. This can be up to 90 days. If you are looking for a collectible firearm then you also need to do your own research first, to be sure if the item you are viewing is correct. This can be done on any of the hundreds of sites devoted to specific manufacturers, models or countries of origin. Don't hesitate to email a seller questions about his stuff. If he is a regular seller of collectibles, he should know the important details and address them in his auction description. Some sellers, like pawn shops or small

retailers, don't know what they are selling so you might need to ask detailed questions. Sellers who fail to respond to questions or are vague with answers should be avoided.

I want to hold and feel an item I'm about to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on. This point is hard to talk someone out of. The fact is that your local dealer or gun show may never have the item you want. Would you rather never have it or take the chance and buy one only viewed in digital pictures?

A good seller will invest in a quality digital camera and learn how to take detailed pictures with it. I show close ups of markings and other important details. I always show rust spotting, small cracks or dents in the wood or other blemishes on the firearm. I have seen sellers whose listings show lousy pictures that are dark or fuzzy and lack up close views of important markings.

Here is where the feedback on an Internet seller will be helpful. Most Internet auction sites have a system where buyers can publicly post their satisfaction with the seller and the merchandise they bought from them. A well established seller can have thousands of feedback reports. Positive feedback will usually mention that the seller uses accurate descriptions, gives excellent service and ships quickly. Negative feedback can come from poor descriptions or pictures of an item, refusal to accept returns, or outright fraud. If a seller gets too many negatives, the site will kick them off completely. If a few negatives appear on an otherwise impressive total, read them with the understanding that it is impossible to make everyone happy. Some buyers are hesitant to buy from new sellers or those with few feedbacks. That would have to be your judgment call. Some of the best deals will be from new, inexperienced sellers.

OK, I found my dream gun, is it time to bid? Not yet. Before you get ready to bid, you should line up an FFL dealer to receive the firearm for you. A non-licensed individual cannot receive a firearm in interstate shipment. However, if the gun you want is in your home state, you can arrange to see it in person or buy it directly from the seller. You will need to be prepared to go to the seller's place of business if they are a retail dealer. Or, if they are not an FFL dealer you can buy the gun directly, if person-to-person transfers are legal in your state.

GunBroker and Auction Arms both have lists of FFL holders who will handle out of state transfers. Just enter your zip code and they provide a list of nearby dealers. Some large shops refuse to handle transfers because they believe it cuts into their business. As though they think you might be ready to buy their new Glock when you are looking for a WWII issue Luger that they don't have and would never buy. Too bad, as this alienates potential customers that might return to buy something out of their stock.

How much will the transfer cost? This varies a lot by region. \$10 - \$25 in most areas will get you a transfer. But in places like California and New Jersey you might pay \$50 - \$100. There just are not many FFLs left in these anti-gun utopias. You also need to ask if they collect sales tax on a transfer. Some states expect the FFL to collect the tax as though he sold the item, even if he is acting only as a receiving agent and you paid the seller directly. You also will want to ask if they will receive a firearm from a non-FFL seller. It is not illegal under federal law or in most states for a non-FFL individual to ship a firearm to another state as long as it is shipped to an FFL. A photocopy of the seller's ID is usually enough to establish identity. Some transfer dealers do not want to receive a gun from a non-licensed individual. You might need to ask the seller if he is a dealer before you bid on his item. It is also wise to ask about the seller's return policy if this is not stated in the auction.

Once you have a transfer FFL lined up, it is time to join the game. It can be frustrating, just like a live auction. There are many strategies involved in when to bid. Some will wait until the last min-

utes of an auction so as to not draw attention to the item they want. I say just decide what you are willing to pay and place your bid. If someone is going to bid more it really does not matter when it happens. There are deals to be had. It just takes time and patience.

What are reserve auctions and what is proxy bidding? A reserve auction is when the seller sets a hidden price for the item that must be met before the item will sell. This is different from the starting price of the auction. The starting price is shown on the auction listing. It can be \$1 and up. If a reserve auction receives bids it will not be a sale until the reserve is met. I have never

listed or placed a bid on a reserve auction. It seems that the reserve price is seldom reached. I think a lot of sellers that use reserves are fishing for how much buyers are willing to pay for an item without having to sell the item. A smart seller will just list his minimum selling price as the starting bid and not waste a buyer's time with reserves.

Proxy bidding is the way that the auction sites raise the bids between competing bidders without requiring a bidder to pay his full bid if he is not bidding against another. For example, Bidder 1 bids \$500 for a Colt revolver

Continued on Page 110

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with a minimum opening bid of \$400. There is no reserve, so the seller is willing to sell his gun for \$400. If no one else places a bid before the auction closes Bidder 1 will win the Colt for \$400. If Bidder 2 jumps in and places a bid of \$450 then the proxy bidding program will up Bidder 1's bid to \$460 or enough to outbid Bidder 2's bid. The bids are raised in increments based on the starting price of the item. Usually five dollars or so. If Bidder 2 decides he really wants that Colt then he can go back and raise his bid to \$600. Now Bidder 1 receives an email informing him that he has been out bid. He has the choice of raising his bid but it must be for more than \$600 to win the Colt.

I won an auction. Now what? The winning bidder in an auction will receive an email from the auction site informing them that they have won. The seller will also send an email with the total and the address to send payment. The shipping charge should have been listed in the seller's description or included in the selling price. Beware of a seller that fails to mention shipping in the auction then tries to add \$50 to the price. Ask before you bid. Most long guns can be shipped for around \$20 - \$25 via UPS ground or U.S. mail depending on the insurance coverage. Anyone can ship a long gun via either method. Handguns can be sent US Mail only if the seller is an FFL holder. That will run \$10 - \$20. UPS requires handguns be sent next day air and that will cost \$35 - \$50 so if you are buying a pistol from a non-FFL keep that in mind. The details of how and where to ship firearms were discussed in a previous column.

The best form of payment is a U.S. Postal Service money order. They can be bought at any post office. The USPS money order is better than a private bank money order in case of a problem with non-delivery of merchandise. The USPS will go after fraud cases involving mail-order sales. Many retail sellers will be able to take a credit card. I do not like online payment services such as Paypal because they have problems of their own with recovering payments when there is a problem with a transaction. You now will mail your payment and FFL copy to the seller. Some transfer FFLs will want to mail their FFL copy directly to the seller. Either way is fine. As long as both get there safely.

When your new treasure arrives at the FFL dealer you go in and fill out the paperwork the same way as in any firearm transaction. Be sure to inspect the gun to be sure it matches the seller's description. It would be easier to make a return before you do the paperwork and take the gun home.

Good luck and happy bidding! **GDTM**

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