

# The 1921 National Matches - The End of an Era...©2002

By Dick Culver

It was a September afternoon at Camp Perry in 1921 and a gentleman by the name of George R. Farr gathered his gear and prepared to leave the firing line after posting a perfect score in the legendary Wimbledon Cup Match... What's so special about posting a possible at 1000 yards? Well, perhaps you will better understand when you realize *how* he ran his perfect string, and his subsequent performance in the "shoot-off" that would be required to determine the final winner of the de-facto long range championship of the United States.



The Farr Trophy

In order to appreciate the shooting sequence that followed, a small amount of history is in order. There were no "V-Rings" or "X-Rings" to act as tie-breakers during or before the 1921 Matches, after all no one had ever fired a perfect score in the Wimbledon until the year before, in 1920! Here's how the match winner was determined if more than one shooter fired a perfect score:

- If a shooter fired a perfect score at 500-yards or greater distance, the winner was chosen based on a continuation of firing until the competitor eventually dropped a shot out of the black. Unlike today, where the top competitors from each relay are selected to compete during a special "shoot-off relay", a shooter simply continued firing until he broke his string of fives... Needless to say, this was a time-consuming, albeit thrilling, way to decide the outcome of an individual match. The old "shoot 'till you miss system" had never been considered a problem prior to 1920, but the 1921 National Matches was destined to usher in a new standard of long range shooting excellence!
- Under the scoring system of the day, the 500/600-yard bulls-eye was 20" in diameter and the 1000-yard target had a 36" five ring! Easy to hit? Don't bet on it! You must remember that these folks were dealing with lumpy metal fouling deposited by cupro-nickel jacketed GI bullets, ammunition that did not equal the later NM issue fodder, no glass bedding, and your shooting jacket was a military blouse (identical to the one worn with the dress uniform) with a recoil pad (usually hand sewn) on the shoulder, and a pad sewn on both elbows. Crude? Well yeah, but... No fancy leather jackets, no special boots, and no shooting mats could be found on the line. The optics utilized in both glass sights and spotting scopes would be called extremely rudimentary and unsophisticated by today's standards.

While Springfield Armory had produced match quality rifles for the military service teams since 1910, there was no provision to sell these rifles to civilians or NRA members until 1921, or allow for their issued to competitors at the National Matches. Springfield was justifiably proud of the 1921 NM Springfield, and promoted their availability with appropriate information in the shooting literature of the day, giving rise to the popular (but technically incorrect) myth that the 1921 NM Rifles were the first rifles produced specifically for the National Matches. The service teams had had access to such rifles (as noted above) since 1910. The National Match Rifles produced for the 1921 Matches had been carefully assembled with star-gaged barrels, and lovingly bedded in flawless stocks, and the actions polished. They were things of beauty to aficionados of military rifles.

As fine as the new rifles were, it hadn't been the rifles that drove the competitors crazy in times past, but rather the lumpy metal fouling due to the cupro-nickel bullet jackets of the issue ammunition...

Virtually all the competitors in the National Matches utilized the GI ammunition issued on the line. The Nationals were subsidized by the U.S. Government, and extra money to buy the finest available commercial ammunition was not readily available to the average competitor. When it came to the Wimbledon Cup however, quite a few of the top ranked long-range competitors preferred to use commercial match ammunition, but those individuals were usually bankrolled by the Service Teams. Frankford Arsenal's new FA Match was about to help change history and make believers out of the 1000-yard shooters.

The National *Trophy* Matches however (National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice Matches) REQUIRED the use of issued Government Ammunition, and most shooters simply shot the government ammunition issued "gratis" on the line in all the matches. Unlike some of the ammunition issued previously, the Frankford Arsenal NM Ammunition furnished to the 1921 competitors was to gain a reputation for accuracy that became legendary. George Farr chose to shoot the new issue National Match ammunition issued on the firing line.

### **A Quick Note on the Ammunition Issued for the 1921 Matches:**

The average (military) ammunition available to the competitor until 1921, utilized a bullet jacket composed of copper and nickel. While the cupro-nickel jacket was acceptable for issue military ammunition, the jacket material tended to leave a lumpy metal fouling in the bore that adversely affected the accuracy of the rifle after just a few rounds. The deposited metal fouling made things worse and caused even more fouling to be deposited in the bore with each subsequent shot. The cupro-nickel metal fouling was the ruination of match accuracy. A formula for "ammonia dope" was readily available to dissolve the lumpy metal fouling, but if you left the "dope" in the bore too long, it could destroy your barrel. A slight slip-up, or a leaky cork in the breech and your rifle bore was history! As a result, shooters resorted to drastic measures to solve the problem. The first attempt to maintain accuracy until the bore could be cleaned with "ammonia dope," was apparently the use of Cosmoline on the tip of the bullet. For rapid fire, the entire end of the 5 round stripper clip was dipped into a small typewriter can full of lubricant (either cosmoline, or for the more affluent, a commercial grease called Mobilubricant). Now, no matter how careful you were, you were probably going to lube your chamber in the process. Since grease is incompressible, the chamber pressure rose sharply.

#### **The Legendary "Tin-Can Ammunition"**



**The 21-R 1921 National Match Cartridge with 180-grain flat-based tin-plated bullet**

The ammunition issued at Camp Perry and fired in the 1921 National Matches was a special lot that came to be known by its nickname "*Tin-Can Ammunition*". The Tin-Can Ammo was an effort by (then) Major Townsend Whelen of Frankford Arsenal to beat the metal fouling problem common to the government cupro-nickel bullet jackets on all U.S. Service Rifle Ammunition. The French had been experimenting with putting tin strips into their artillery shells in an attempt to solve the problem with large caliber weapons. It

was seemingly successful, and held much promise for small arms ammunition. Major Whelen, being aware of the French efforts and reported results, decided to tin plate the .30-'06 projectiles for the 1921 Matches. His experiment worked, and the cupro-nickel fouling

ceased to be a problem, but initially unconvinced competitors continued to grease their bullets. Records were destined to fall, but all was not well in Mudville...

For unrelated reasons, (and the inability of the competitors to comprehend the pressure problems created by greasing the bullets), several failures of the single heat treated Springfields were undeservedly blamed on the ammunition. Be that as it may, the so-called "*Tin-Can Ammo*" accounted for many new records, and established new accuracy standards for future National Match Ammunition. The NM 1921 ammunition demonstrated that the new National Match Springfield Rifle could shoot well, and allowed long-range rifle shooting to take a quantum leap forward.



**Major Townsend Whelen (in uniform)**  
with shooting notable Colonel Brookheart  
Whelen, a Distinguished Marksman and Ordnance  
Expert was the architect of the famous "Tin-Can"  
Ammunition fired in the 1921 matches.

The "*Tin-Can Ammunition*" turned out to be an exceptionally accurate load in addition to its non-fouling properties. Major Whelen had conquered the lumpy metal fouling of the cupronickel bullet jacket, but he was not able to conquer human nature, but therein lays another story. After the 1921 Nationals, the excellent *Tin-Can Ammunition* was withdrawn from service due to a real or perceived pressure problem, due at least in part to the reluctance of the old time shooters to stop lubricating the new ammunition.

### **George Farr's Rendezvous With Destiny:**

George Farr, a tall resident of the State of Washington had been selected by the Washington State Rifle Team. A civil engineer by profession, he had surveyed track and bridge projects for the Santa Fe, Great Northern, and Canadian Pacific Railroads, and was a self-taught marksman of considerable skill, ...but he had never entered National Competition. He had been recalled from a hunting trip in his beloved Washington Mountains to travel east from Seattle to Camp Perry as a member of the Washington State Rifle Team. George was heading for the proving ground for American Riflemen to keep a date with destiny. On the day of the Wimbledon Cup, George reported to the firing line wearing a khaki shirt and dungarees and sporting a black slouch hat. A quick look at Farr would not have marked him as "*the*" man to beat in the legendary Wimbledon Match. If he were to be judged by the rudimentary equipment he carried, he would not have even been immediately identified as a seasoned match competitor. He was however, in retrospect, an extremely gifted amateur, about to teach the Easterners a thing or two about long range rifle shooting! By most competitive match standards, George should have been over the hill. He was a lanky 6 footer, but had already reached his 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday, earning him the nickname of "Dad Farr" much to his dismay... Virtually no one paid any attention when he moved his gear onto the line and prepared to fire. He was squadded on the last relay, moving to the firing line at 4:30 and the light was already showing signs of



**Future Long Range Service Rifle  
Record Holder, George Farr  
Prior to departing for Camp Perry**

fading. Most of the well-known “big guns” had been squadded on the earlier relays, and already headed back to their tents to stow their gear.

Not having the financial wherewithal to purchase a commercial spotting scope, he had taken one barrel of a pair of French Opera Glasses (by sawing-off the other half) to serve instead, hoping that this crude substitute would allow him to see the spotters and perhaps the mirage at 1000 yards... Having heard that he could draw a rifle at Camp Perry from the Government, and be issued the ammunition to shoot the matches including the fabled Wimbledon Cup, Dad decided to try his hand at long range shooting, a game in which he had excelled in the Northwest, although not in the rarified atmosphere of the National Rifle Matches.



Dad Farr had drawn one of the newly produced National Match M1903 Springfields from Army Ordnance prior to the matches, and could hardly wait to try it out. The day prior to the Wimbledon Cup Match however, his first rifle suddenly went sour, so he turned it in and drew his second rifle of the match. He gave it a thorough cleaning and prepared to sight it in during the shorter-ranged matches the following day. On that fateful 9<sup>th</sup> day of September 1921, Dad left the 600-yard line with a newly acquired zero and reported to the 1000-yard range prepared to fire on the final relay. The time was 4:30 PM and the light was already beginning to fade.



**Sergeant John W. Adkins USMC**  
Winner of the 1921 Wimbledon Match  
with 76 consecutive bullseyes.  
Note: the scorekeepers in the background

In accordance with the match procedures of the day, Dad was issued the necessary 22 rounds to fire the match by the scorer behind his firing point, (that is, 2 sighting rounds, and 20 rounds for record). Old Dad was hardly noticed when he got into position. Even if anyone had looked, they would have observed a shooter apparently rather poorly equipped to fire for the long-range championship of the United States. Unlike the current leader in the Wimbledon at that moment, “Ol’ Dad” was using the issue (iron) Springfield Sights that he had just blackened with a “Lucifer” match. The man to beat was a Marine Sergeant by the name of John Adkins. Adkins had just fired a total of 76 consecutive bull's-eyes before he lost a round out of the black. While Sergeant Adkins had fired a remarkable score, he had performed this feat of arms using a “scope sighted”

Springfield, not the issue(d) Service Rifle, and he had chosen to use Remington Match Ammunition instead of the Frankford Arsenal “Tin-Can” Ammunition. If Dad was impressed or “awed” by Adkins’ performance he didn’t convey his concern to his friends or any of those in the immediate vicinity.

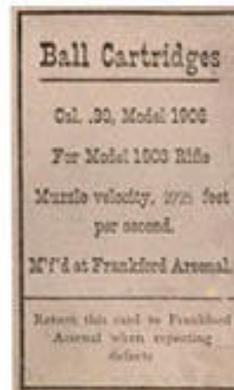
Even though Farr hadn't yet had an opportunity to sight in the "borrowed rifle" at the 1000-yard line, he had talked to a number of experienced competitors, and had gotten an idea of where to start with his initial sight setting. Out of his gear, he produced a *P.J. O'Hare Sight Micrometer* (designed to make precise 1 minute click elevation changes to the Springfield leaf sight), broke out his wire-rimmed reading glasses and made his “come-up” calculated from his 600-yard dope acquired just prior to reporting for the Wimbledon. Whether or not the

sight micrometer was his or another borrowed piece of gear is not clear. Farr removed his reading glasses and prepared to start what would become one of the most fabled strings of fire in history.

Dad's first shot was a high "trey" (a shot in the 3 ring for you "Johnny-come-latelys" – see comments at the end of the article with a picture of his actual score card), but well on paper at 1000 yards. His shooting technique was unorthodox to say the least. He chose to load an entire clip of 5-rounds into the magazine instead of using the usual "single cartridge loading method" favored by most shooters. Rather than maintain a rock solid position, he tended to move around between shots, readjusting his elbows and squirming around for a more comfortable shooting position. But unorthodox or not, Dad had done the miraculous, he had hit paper with his first shot with a new rifle. As it turned out, it was all he needed! Farr proceeded to put his next sighter and the subsequent 20 rounds for record into the 36" bulls-eye! Thinking he was finished, George started to move off the firing line.

Obviously not a seasoned National Match Shooter, he was not aware of the "shoot 'till you miss the black" rule. The range officer grabbed Ol' Dad and told him that he must continue his string until he dropped out of the black... Scratching his head, Dad agreed, and the scorer produced two additional clips of the Tin-Can Ammunition. George chuckled protesting that he was sure one clip would be enough. He climbed back into position and jammed one of his additional clips into the rifle much to the astonishment of the gallery of onlookers that had begun to gather. They hadn't witnessed his first string of fire and weren't prepared for George's loading and shooting techniques. Firing as rapidly as his rather slow butt service would allow, his string of 5's continued to mount. The darkness was beginning to close in, but Dad didn't seem to notice. Apparently not all 62 year old blue eyes are equal!

Somewhere around the 50<sup>th</sup> bulls-eye, George Farr had used all the Frankford Arsenal ammunition on the line, after all, who would have figured he'd need so many rounds? The original 22 cartridges should have been more than enough for the average competitor, but George was anything but average! The additional ammunition shouldn't have been a problem, but the scorekeepers hadn't been keeping a large stash of it handy since many of the Wimbledon Competitors had chosen to shoot the very accurate Commercial 180-grain Remington Match Load. A frantic search of the line turned up additional ammunition, but the time necessary to produce the additional "fodder" combined with the slow butt service was eating up precious daylight.

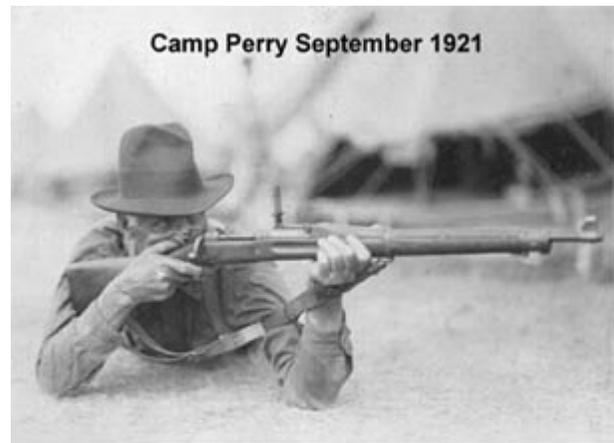


**Box Label and Packing Slip  
...for "lot" of Tin Can Ammunition  
by Dad Farr in his record setting  
performance in the Wimbledon Match**

After having been re-supplied with ammo, George rolled back into the prone position and continued to fire. Between rounds, he often rested his head on his arms awaiting the reappearance of his target. As the light continued to fade, the shots began to stray a bit but still remained in the black. On his 66<sup>th</sup> shot, the light had faded to the point that Dad began to hold at the top of the butts just below the target to give a more distinct aiming point in the rapidly fading light.

His string of 5s continued through the 70<sup>th</sup> round for record, but at last the law of averages caught up to him and darkness took its toll. His remarkable string of fire ended at 6:10 PM – he had been shooting for exactly 1 hour and 40 minutes. The time required to find the necessary additional ammunition and the slow butt service may well have cost him the coveted Wimbledon... He could no longer see the target on his 71<sup>st</sup> shot for record. As soon as he fired his last shot, he called it out of the black! This was one of the most phenomenal strings of fire in history, and had the ammunition been readily available, he might well have caught Sgt. Adkins' string of 76 bulls-eyes with an iron sighted '03. Dad had fired a total of 71 consecutive bulls-eyes if you count his second sighter. George Farr had produced one of the most remarkable strings of fire in history using a borrowed rifle, iron sights and a half a pair of binoculars, shooting issue(d) ammunition.

Although Dad didn't have the \$41.55 necessary to purchase his "borrowed" NM Springfield (as was allowed in that day and time), the awed competitors and admirers chipped in and bought it for him along with a case of ammunition. The commemorative plate screwed to the right hand side of the presentation rifle identified the Rifle as "*The Civilian Team Trophy*" and listed all the Civilian Teams that had chipped in and purchased the rifle (see the illustrations at the end of the article). A beautiful silver trophy to commemorate his performance, appropriately named "*The Farr Trophy*," was prepared in time for the 1922 Nationals. Starting the following year in 1922, the high service rifle shooter in the Wimbledon Cup was presented the new *Farr Trophy*, making it the "service rifle subset" of the Wimbledon... This practice continued until 1979 when the *Farr Trophy* attained its own status as a separate legitimate trophy match, and has become, in fact, "*The Service Rifle Wimbledon*".



Dad Farr posing for photograph following his 71 "bullseyes" in the "Wimbledon Match" Notice front sight cover in place and typical shooter's quarters in background

What did Dad Farr's performance have to do with ending an era? Well, Farr's shooting, when added to the phenomenal performance of Marine Sergeants Adkins, Crawley, Luyster, and the hard holding Marine Tom Jones, to name a few, had pointed out to the shooting gurus of the day, that deciding the outcome of a long range match using the "shoot 'till you miss" system was extremely time consuming. A more streamlined method was sought and one that would perhaps be a more fair method than the existing shoot-offs. Had Farr fired on an earlier relay, he might well have had enough light to keep his string of fire going long enough to win the Wimbledon with an iron sighted Springfield.

The final solution of adding of a tie-breaking 12" *V Ring* to the existing *B Target* with its 20" bulls-eye and a similar 20" *V Ring* to the existing long range *C Target* with its 36" black stands as a legacy of the 1921 Nationals, and a group of truly exceptional shooters. Starting in 1922, the matches would be awarded to the shooter who kept the majority his or her shots closest to the center of the bulls-eye during their sting of fire, assuming the total overall score was the same. The new "V Ring" set the standard measurement of excellence in high power shooting circles until the introduction of the "10X" targets for the 200, 300 and 600-yd targets in 1967, and the coming of the "10X" 1000-yard target in 1975.

If you consider the accomplishments of Dad Farr and his hard holding compatriots of the 1921 Matches to be inconsequential in light of today's shooting accomplishments, consider the following statistics:

*The new 36" bulls-eye, sporting a 20" V ring in 1922, continued to be used for 1000-yard competition through 1974, when it was finally supplanted by the "new fangled" 10X target in 1975. Allowing for the seven years that the Nationals were not fired due to a lack of funds during the great depression (1932, 1933 1935 - 1939), and including an additional 10 year period from 1941 though 1950 (due to WWII and the start of Korea), the Farr Trophy was awarded 36 more times for scores fired on the 5-V target prior to the adoption of a 10-X target. During those 36 years a perfect score won the Trophy a total of only 12 more times. By 1974, rifles and ammunition had improved materially, along with the shooting gear, differing little from those being used today. George's performance firing an '03 Springfield with iron sights makes his accomplishment even more impressive! This is truly a fitting memorial to the ability of a gimlet-eyed 62 year old gentleman who borrowed a rifle, using issue government ammunition, and a half of a pair of French Opera glasses for a spotting scope, taught a lesson to those who thought of themselves as long range champions.*

Here then is a toast to George "Dad" Farr, an ordinary man who might have gone unnoticed had it not been for an extraordinary talent. One afternoon in September of 1921 he passed into history, having helped change an era, and in doing so, left us a legacy to endure for all time...

*ROC*

### **Acknowledgements and a Chronology:**

The round of 1921 "Tin-Can" Ammunition was generously donated to the project by Major Jim Land USMC (Ret.) from his extensive cartridge collection. The picture of the cartridge is an actual scan of the 21-R Cartridge, along with its sectioned case, graphically depicted through the magic of my Memsahib's awesome talents as a graphics artist.

Photographs of Dad Farr's rifle which he used to his phenomenal score, are compliments of the Farr Family. Dad's son is still hale and hearty at 100 years old, and I owe much of Dad's history to his kind remembrances along with those of his grandson, Bill.

The story itself was originally told to me when I was about 14-years old by my Dad who fired with the Marines at Camp Perry in 1921 and regaled me with stories of the old timer who came to Perry and wiped out all of the well known professional shots of the day. I was always fascinated with the story and later read my first semi-official account of the story in the USMC "Red Book" of Marksmanship published in 1959.

When I became interested in doing a history of marksmanship during the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Farr's name again came up. Back to Jim Land again who obligingly came to the rescue by digging through the NRA files of "Arms and the Man" for the 1921 Nationals. Jim sent me some burned copies of the original records, along with an obituary of Dad Farr in the renamed NRA publication, now called the *American Rifleman* in the August 1935 edition.

Finding the Farr Family after all these years was no mean task. I searched the historical archives in Seattle, including funeral homes to find where he was finally laid to rest in hopes of finding a record of the family residence. I had even contracted with some college youngsters who made a few extra dollars researching genealogy archives. Alas to no avail. I



“mis-engraved” for 80 years, and if anyone had caught the error, it was never publicized! While Farr’s score was based on his firing 70 consecutive bullseyes for record, the 71<sup>st</sup> shot being his 2<sup>nd</sup> sighter, the legend will be forever tied to the legendary 71 consecutive bullseyes. This is correct of course, but the extra bullseye was technically NOT a part of his score!

Note that the official score card has Dad’s first sighter marked as a 2 (duce), as opposed to the literature of the day, and noted in *Arms and the Man*. Whatever his first shot was, duce or trey, his second shot was most assuredly a five. Also note that his status on the card indicates that he was a “tyro” – a designation and impression that would be forever changed after the fateful afternoon of September the 9<sup>th</sup> of 1921.

**Vintage Pictures of the 1921 National Rifle Matches and the Washington State Rifle Team:**



Dad Farr

**Washington State Team prior to departing for Perry**



**First Four Tents Left to Right  
Home of Dad Farr’s Washington State  
Civilain Rifle & Pistol Team  
1921 Nationals Matches Camp Perry**



**Dad Farr On 1000 Yard Butts  
Target #24 Where Run of 71 Straight  
Bullseyes were made by Dad Farr on:  
On Sept 9th 1921**



**Aggutter                  Farr  
Two Gentlemen attired  
for the awards ceremony**

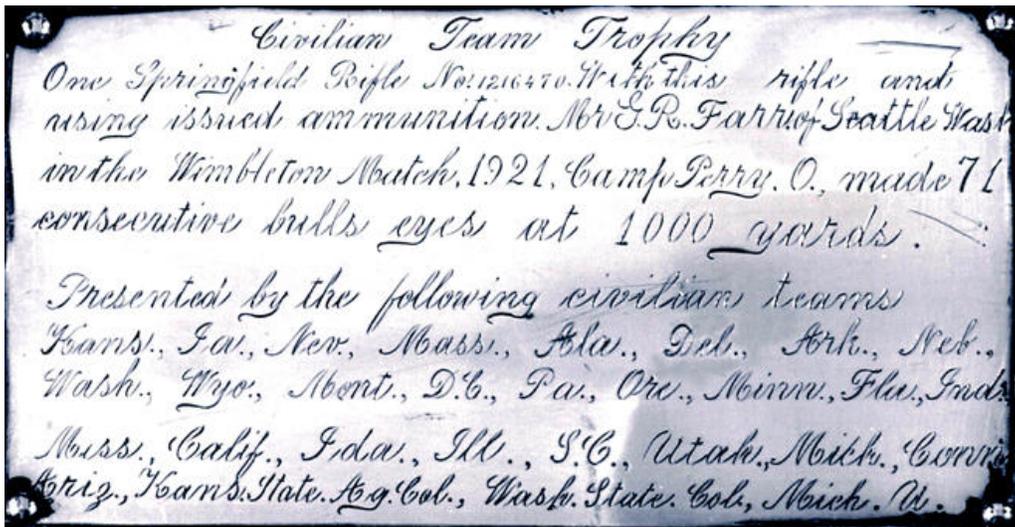
*Civilian Team Trophy*

*One Springfield Rifle No. 1216470. With this rifle and using issued ammunition Mr. G. R. Farr of Seattle, Wash. in the Wimbledon Match, 1921, Camp Perry, O. made 71 consecutive bulls eyes at 1000 yards*

*Presented by the following civilian teams*

*Kans., Ia., Nev., Mass., Ala., Del., Ark., Neb., Wash., Wyo., Mont., D. C., Pa., Ore., Minn., Fla., Ind., Miss., Calif., Ida., Ill, S. C., Utah., Mich., Conn., Ariz., Kans. State. Ag. Col., Wash. State Col., Mich. U.*

Translation of the actual inscription on presentation plate is illustrated above



(photo compliments of Bill Farr, George Farr's grandson)

**Photo of plate on rifle presented to George R. Farr following his extraordinary string of 71 consecutive bullseyes in Sept. 1921 – Rifle and Plate were paid for by the Civilian Teams listed above.**

**Note:** The “Farr Trophy” had not yet been established, hence the designation of “Civilian Team Trophy” on the plate.