

The Largest Stock of Guns in Canada Charles Stark and Firearm Retailing in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto

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Volume 114, Number 1, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088106ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088106ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Brown, R. B. (2022). The Largest Stock of Guns in Canada: Charles Stark and Firearm Retailing in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto. *Ontario History*, 114(1), 88–108. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088106ar>

Article abstract

This article examines the business of Toronto retailer Charles Stark, who in the late nineteenth century was Canada's leading gun seller. Stark took advantage of, and encouraged, civilian interest in firearms. He emphasized the attractiveness, capabilities, and quality of modern weapons, urging customers to see firearms as consumer items that could be used for target shooting, hunting, or defence. Stark employed innovative new marketing and sales techniques. Most importantly, he produced a lengthy and beautifully illustrated catalogue by the early 1880s that preceded and dwarfed Timothy Eaton's early catalogue business.

THE LARGEST STOCK OF GUNS IN CANADA

Charles Stark and Firearm Retailing in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto

by R. Blake Brown

This article examines the business of Charles Stark, who in the 1880s and early 1890s claimed to be Canada's leading gun dealer. It seeks to expand our understanding of the use of guns in the late nineteenth century by exploring the kinds of weapons available to the public, and how retailers like Stark responded to, and encouraged, civilian interest in firearms. Changes in firearm manufacturing and technology revolutionized guns in the mid to late nineteenth century. Factories churned out reliable mass-produced firearms with interchangeable parts. Breech-loading, rifled weapons came to replace muzzle-loaded, smooth-bore firearms. Revolvers and magazine-fed firearms vastly increased the rate of fire of many guns, and rifled barrels allowed shooters to hit targets at much longer ranges. Stark aggressively marketed these firearms. He used his experience as a jeweller to tap into Victorian consumerist attitudes, often portraying firearms as attractive items of desire, rather than need. In *The Gun-*

ning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture, Pamela Haag examines the development of industrial firearms production in the United States and the business techniques used to broaden the market for guns. Haag argues that low demand meant that gun makers had to develop markets: "From the gun industrialist's perspective, supply creates the need for demand: volume production required volume consumption."¹ This meant targeting different segments of the market and creating a desire for guns among people who did not really need them. Stark's firearm retailing demonstrates that Canada was caught up in the gun industry's effort to expand the market for firearms. Stark encouraged and took advantage of the popularity of organized rifle shooting, trap shooting, and recreational hunting to sell firearms. And, he encouraged urban Canadians to purchase guns to defend themselves and their property.

Historians have given no attention to Stark, and little attention to how Ca-

¹ Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xiv.

Abstract

This article examines the business of Toronto retailer Charles Stark, who in the late nineteenth century was Canada's leading gun seller. Stark took advantage of, and encouraged, civilian interest in firearms. He emphasized the attractiveness, capabilities, and quality of modern weapons, urging customers to see firearms as consumer items that could be used for target shooting, hunting, or defence. Stark employed innovative new marketing and sales techniques. Most importantly, he produced a lengthy and beautifully illustrated catalogue by the early 1880s that preceded and dwarfed Timothy Eaton's early catalogue business.

Résumé: Dans cet article, nous examinerons l'entreprise du détaillant torontois Charles Stark, qui, à la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle, était le vendeur prépondérant d'armes au Canada. Stark avait profité de l'intérêt des civils pour les armes à feu tout en encourageant cet intérêt. Il a souligné l'attrait, les capacités et la qualité des armes modernes, exhortant ses clients à voir les armes à feu comme des biens de consommation qui pouvaient être utilisés pour le tir à la cible, la chasse, ou la défense. Stark a eu recours à de nouvelles techniques innovantes de marketing et de vente. Plus important encore, il a produit un catalogue superbement illustré au début des années 1880, qui a précédé et éclipsé celui de l'entreprise de Timothy Eaton.

nadian retailers marketed firearms to consumers. This article first overviews his business career, showing how he went from a jeweller to one of Canada's earliest and most ambitious catalogue retailers and a major gun seller. The second and third parts of the article focus on his firearms business, first examining the products he sold, and then how he marketed guns. In exploring this subject, this article

makes use of the many advertisements he placed in newspapers and periodicals, as well as media reports on his business successes and failures. It also closely analyzes several of Stark's mail order catalogues that have survived in scattered libraries and archives: the catalogues from 1880, 1882, 1884, 1887, and catalogues from approximately 1889 and 1894.² The catalogues are remarkable because of their

² *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue* (Toronto: Hawkins & Co., 1880) and *Stark's Catalogue, 1882* (Toronto: n.p.?, 1882) are available at the Baillie Special Collections Centre of the Toronto Reference Library. *Charles Stark, Importer, Wholesaler and Retail Dealer in Watches, Jewellery, Plated-ware and Fire Arms, at Rock Bottom Cash Prices* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co., 1884) [*Stark's Catalogue, 1884*] is available at <www.canadiana.ca>. *Charles Stark, Importer, Wholesale and Retail Dealer in Guns, Rifles, Revolvers, Ammunition, Sporting Goods...*, *Illustrated Catalogue, 1887, Firearms Department* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co., 1887) [*Stark's Catalogue, 1887*] is available in the Archives of Ontario, James Haydon fonds, F 260, file Charles Stark, Toronto. *Stark's Catalogue, c.1889* (Toronto: n.p.?, 1889?) is available at the Internet Archive at <<https://archive.org/details/charlesstarkcomp00char>>, and at Library and Archives Canada. A copy of *Stark's Catalogue, supplement, c.1894* (Toronto: n.p.?, 1894?) can be found at the Ontario Jewish Archives, Morris Norman collection, Fonds 22, item 37. The exact dates of publication of some of the catalogues are difficult to confirm because they are missing cover pages or publication information. For example, the catalogue from the late 1880s does not include its year of publication, though there are hints that it dates from 1888 or 1889. It includes Spalding's official baseball guide for 1889 and refers to Remington's "New Model (1889) Double Barrel Shot Guns." *Stark's Catalogue, c.1889*, 195.

length, detailed product descriptions, and beautiful illustrations. Together, these sources provide a unique window into both the desires of Canadian firearm owners and the effort of the gun industry to expand the market for weapons at a time when urbanization made firearms less necessary.

Charles Stark's Business Interests

Charles Stark was born in Tiverton, County of Devon in England in 1829. He emigrated to North America, eventually moving to Chicago where he established a jewelry business and allegedly amassed a fortune during the American Civil War. He married Charlotte Wade in October 1866, and had three children: two daughters, Charlotte and Eva Mary, who both survived childhood, and a son, Charles, who was born in 1870 but died in 1871. Stark passed away in 1899 of Bright's disease (i.e. kidney disease). The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed his business. It reopened soon after, but sometime in the 1870s he returned to Canada. By the late 1870s, Stark operated Rogers Manufacturing Company located at 52 Church St. in Toronto. This company specialized in selling jewelry, watches, and firearms. The name of the business had changed to

Charles Stark & Co. by the early 1880s, but it continued to sell similar products. Stark's specialization in the sale of jewelry and firearms may seem an odd mix. However, in the late nineteenth century both were luxuries for many middle- and upper-class urban Canadians, rather than necessities, and the tactics used to market one could easily be employed to sell the other. As well, the manufacturing of firearms and jewelry items like watches had both been revolutionized by nineteenth-century industrialization, which shifted much of their production from the artisan's shop to the factory floor. The result was that watches and firearms were mass produced, had interchangeable parts, and became cheaper and thus somewhat more available to more consumers.³

Stark's watch business provided him with knowledge of how to retail mass produced luxury goods. Watchmakers had long made timepieces that could be worn, though watches remained luxury items into the second half of the eighteenth century and generally kept poor time. In 1857, the American Watch Company of Waltham, Massachusetts manufactured a watch that used interchangeable parts. This improved accuracy and reduced production costs, as well as the expense of completing repairs. By 1865, the American Watch Company

³ "Dissolution," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 July 1870; "Jewelry," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 October 1871; "Dissolution of Partnership," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 October 1872; Archives of Ontario, Registrations of Deaths, 1869-1948, MS935, Reel 90 (1899); *Toronto Directory for 1878, Containing an Alphabetical Directory of the Citizens, and a Street Directory with Classified Business Directory* (Toronto: Might & Taylor, 1878), 466; S. James Gooding, *The Canadian Gunsmiths, 1608-1900* (West Hill, ON: Museum Restoration Services, 1962), 168; *The Canadian Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge for the Year 1879...* (Toronto: Copp, Clark & Co., 1879), 162; "500 Military Rifles," *Globe*, 11 October 1879.

produced more than 50,000 watches each year. Pocket watches were a key part of Stark's jewelry business. He emphasized the quality, beauty, and affordability of mass-produced 'Waltham' watches, and sought to keep prices down through volume sales.⁴

Like watches, the manufacture and retailing of firearms were also deeply affected by industrialization. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, long guns were generally single-shot, muzzle-loaded, smooth-bore weapons that were slow to load, inaccurate beyond approximately one-hundred metres, and often misfired. More accurate rifled weapons had long existed but tended to build up residue that fouled the barrel until the introduction of new conical ammunition that expanded upon being fired and thus helped prevent the accumulation of residue. Breech-loading guns also largely replaced muzzle-loaded weapons. New ammunition and rifled barrels made

firearms more accurate at long ranges. Manufacturers also developed long guns with internal magazines that could hold several rounds of ammunition. Typically, these firearms used a 'manual action' system (often a 'lever action' design) to load fresh cartridges into the gun's chamber. This greatly increased the speed with which such guns could be fired. Handguns underwent a similar transformation. At the beginning of the century, most handguns were also muzzle-loaded, smooth bore weapons. Samuel Colt began producing a pistol designed with multiple rounds of ammunition held in a revolving cylinder. This became the basic design for other 'revolvers,' with several companies producing such guns by the 1860s. Breech-loading rifles and handguns became more effective with new firing systems. Flintlock ignition was first replaced with a percussion cap system, in which a small copper cap filled with a charge was inserted into a 'nipple' at the

⁴ Stark complained that an association of American manufacturers of watch movements refused to sell to him, instead saying all orders had to go through members of a Canadian wholesale (or 'jobbers') association. Stark objected to this on the ground that he was not a small retailer but a major player in the Canadian industry. In 1886, Stark launched a lawsuit against the American Watch Case Company, claiming \$25,000 in damages on account of its effort to boycott him from purchasing watch cases and movements. Smaller retailers, Stark said, complained that consumers would not pay prices above those listed in his catalogue. This kind of complaint was made against other catalogue retailers in this period. The challenges of acquiring supply led Stark to begin manufacturing his own watch cases. The *Canadian Manufacturer and Industrial World* reported in 1888 that Stark's watch factory was "one of the largest, best equipped and most important in the country." "Charles Stark," *Canadian Manufacturer and Industrial World*, 15:6 (21 September 1888), 207; "Manufacturing," *Canadian Manufacturer and Industrial World*, 15:11 (7 December 1888), 400; N.C. Wallace, *Report of the Select Committee appointed 29th February, 1888, to Investigate and Report upon Alleged Combinations in Manufactures, Trade and Insurance in Canada* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1888), 323-31; *Monetary Times, Trade Review and Insurance Chronicle*, 19:46 (14 May 1886), 1290; "A Heavy Suit," *The Trader* (June 1886), 18; Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 196; David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 116; Vincent P. Carosso, "The Waltham Watch Company: A Case History," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*, 23:4 (1949), 165-87.

rear of the gun barrel. Pulling the trigger made the hammer strike the cap, which ignited a spark in the cap and then the gun powder. Eventually, however, ammunition manufacturers produced metal cartridges that included both the projectile and the powder and would discharge when struck by a gun's hammer.⁵

The American firearms industry of the late nineteenth century could produce huge numbers of weapons in its factories, and manufacturers worked hard to sell these weapons to consumers. Gun manufacturers developed retailing networks throughout North America and sought to expand the market for firearms beyond people who needed them for practical purposes like protecting livestock from predators or subsistence hunting. This was important for the industry since urbanization shrunk the percentage of people who needed firearms for traditional hunting or farming purposes. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, the percentage of Ontarians who used firearms

was relatively modest. Douglas McCalla has shown that new settlers often used guns for subsistence and defence, but, once established, they tended to focus on their agricultural or other business pursuits, and thus shot less. This led the firearms industry (including Stark) to target different potential market segments for firearms, including the growing urban middle class of the time.⁶

Stark advertised extensively. He took out advertisements in various newspapers and journals, and in 1886 began publishing *Forest and Farm*, a paper devoted to the "field, sports, and farming interests" which prominently featured his firearm advertisements.⁷ In the early 1880s, he took part in exhibitions at which he displayed his firearms. For example, he set up an impressive exhibit of guns at the 1882 Toronto Exhibition, winning a medal, an accomplishment he then trumpeted in his print advertisements.⁸ Stark was also an early adopter of mail order catalogues. In doing so, he

⁵ Priya Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 46-50; W.Y. Carman, *A History of Firearms, from Earliest Times to 1914* (London: Routledge, 1955).

⁶ Douglas McCalla, "Upper Canadians and Their Guns: An Exploration via Country Store Accounts (1805-1861)," *Ontario History*, 97:2 (2005), 121-37; Douglas McCalla, *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 101-107; Robert A. Henning and Terrence H. Witkowski, "The Advertising of E. Remington & Sons: The Creation of an Iconic Brand, 1854-1888," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 5:4 (2013), 418-48; Haag, *The Gunning of America*, 167.

⁷ *Grip*, 23:11 (13 September 1884); "Our Free 120 Page Catalogue," *Grip*, 26:1 (9 January 1886); "Catalogue for 1886," *The Week*, 3:18 (April 1886), 287; "The Last to Throw up the Sponge," *Forest and Farm*, 3:6 (22 December 1888); "On Hand Again," *Canada Presbyterian*, 19:46 (12 November 1890), 738; "Forest and Stream," *Globe*, 22 November 1886; "A New Esteemed Contemporary," *Grip*, 27:21 (27 November 1886), 3.

⁸ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1882, 67; *Globe*, 7 October 1882.

took advantage of Canada's growing railway system, which allowed goods to be shipped relatively quickly far and wide at reasonable cost. Historical discussions of the early mail order catalogue business in Canada normally focus on Timothy Eaton, who in 1884 produced a 32-page catalogue. However, Stark's first catalogue predated Eaton's. In the late 1880s his company claimed to be the "pioneers of the 'Illustrated Catalogue System,' through which we place before the public annually illustrations, descriptions and net prices of all general lines of merchandise, enabling everybody living at a distance to buy to as good advantage as if present at our counters"⁹ and in 1899 the *Toronto Star* declared that Stark was "the originator of the 'catalogue' system, now so prevalent in business methods."¹⁰ Only some of his catalogues have survived, though his advertisements in other periodicals often referenced the catalogues and encouraged consumers to request copies. In 1880, Stark promoted a "mammoth" 96-page catalogue with 600 illustrations of firearms, jewelry, watches, and other products.¹¹ The use of illustrations in the early 1880s was noteworthy. Eaton's early catalogues contained no illustrations. As Stark's busi-

ness expanded into new products, his catalogue also grew in length. By 1884, it was 120 pages, and Stark said that it included 1,000 illustrations. In 1887, he divided his catalogue in two—a 95-page catalogue for firearms, ammunition, and sporting goods; and a second for watches and jewelry.¹² By the late 1880s, he published a single catalogue that was an astounding 320 pages long; he claimed it contained about 3,000 articles for sale and had almost the same number of illustrations.¹³ He continued to use a 320-page catalogue until at least the early 1890s, after which his business troubles (discussed below) led him to pare back the size of his catalogues and to focus on his core business of firearms, sporting goods, and jewelry.

Stark employed sales techniques used by other innovators in the business. These included offering low prices by buying in bulk from manufacturers, rather than wholesalers. Firearms were durable goods, meaning that many consumers would choose their firearms with care. Buyers in Toronto could visit his store to view goods. To help mail order purchasers weigh their options, he provided detailed descriptions in the catalogues of the firearms he offered, and assured customers

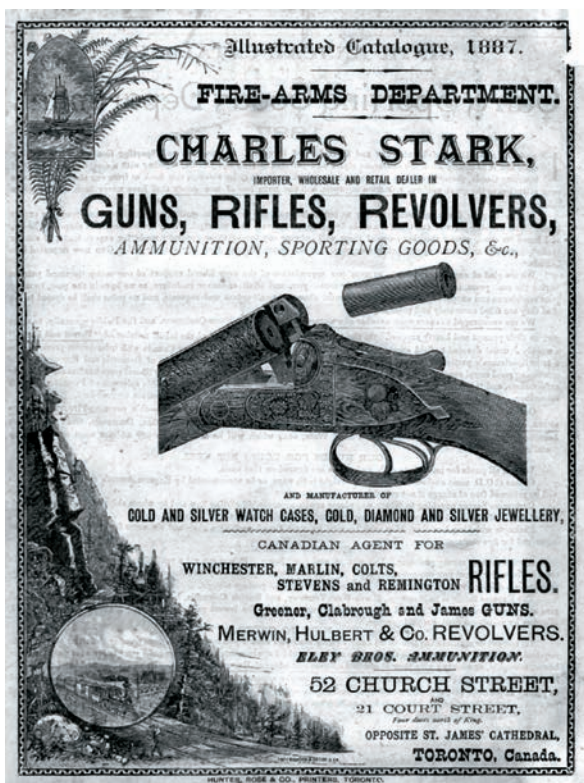
⁹ *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, n.p..

¹⁰ "Mr. Stark is Dead," *Toronto Star*, 21 June 1899.

¹¹ *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*; "Sporting Goods," *Toronto Weekly Mail*, 24 December 1880. Also see "The Climax," *Farmers' Advocate and Home Magazine*, 16:2 (February 1881), 48; *The Wesleyan*, 33:12 (March 1881); "Grand Excursion to Manitoba!," *Globe*, 18 February 1882; "Reduced Prices," *Dutton Enterprise*, 22 March 1883; "Solid Silver Brooch," *Toronto Weekly Mail*, 11:607 (15 November 1883).

¹² *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 2.

¹³ "The Chas. Stark Co., Ltd.," *Grip*, 33:24 (14 December 1889).



that the products matched the descriptions. He suggested that his illustrations also helped consumers since they “clearly show the numerous styles and patterns of Gun equipment” without having to view the firearms firsthand.¹⁴ He also guaranteed consumers satisfaction. Stark sold across a broad geographic area. In 1884, he claimed to have patrons in “every City, Town and Village in the Dominion from

Through the 1880s, Charles Stark expanded the size of his catalogue retail business. In 1887, he divided his catalogue in two, publishing a 95-page catalogue that advertised mostly firearms, and shooting supplies. Source: Stark's Catalogue, 1887.

Newfoundland to British Columbia.”¹⁵ His company also sold all goods for cash, rather than credit, another of the new sales techniques of the period.¹⁶ In the late 1880s, Stark explained that the ‘cash only’ approach meant that he could keep prices low since consumers did not have to underwrite losses suffered by the company from other customers who failed to pay their debts. He allowed customers to order by C.O.D. (cash on delivery) to some parts of Canada, though he added a two-dollar fee for this service “to show you *mean business*.”¹⁷ Catalogues included detailed descriptions on how to make orders and to send money by mail.¹⁸ For example, the 1887 catalogue told customers that they should always register money packages and seal their letters with wax. Customers should use a post-office order or bank draft if possible. Customers were warned not to order by cutting out parts of the catalogue and mailing it to Stark's. Instead, they were to send a letter clearly indicating the page, number, and name of the article. “Be as explicit and brief as possible,” Stark requested in 1887.¹⁹ In some of

¹⁴ Stark's Catalogue, 1887, 2.

¹⁵ Stark's Catalogue, 1884, 2.

¹⁶ Belisle, *Retail Nation*, 18-19; Ian M. Drummond, *Progress without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 280-282.

¹⁷ Stark's Catalogue, c.1889, 3.

¹⁸ Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue, 3; Stark's Catalogue, 1884, 2.

¹⁹ Stark's Catalogue, 1887, 2.

the catalogues, Stark's noted the price of mailing pistols, with larger revolvers costing more. For example, he charged seventeen cents postage for a small revolver, and fifty-nine cents for some larger models.²⁰ Undertaking this catalogue business was made easier by Canada's lax regulations regarding the sale of firearms. Anyone could purchase and use a rifle or shotgun. Concerns with the availability of pistols led to some regulation in the 1870s, though this was aimed at discouraging the carrying of handguns, not their purchase. The only exception to this approach was a provision in the 1892 *Criminal Code* that made it an offence to sell or gift a pistol to anyone under the age of sixteen.²¹

The surviving Stark catalogues demonstrate how his business changed and expanded during the 1880s. Those from the early 1880s mostly consisted of two parts: one offering jewelry and decorative housewares; the other firearms. In 1884, the jewelry section made up two-thirds of the catalogue. Stark sold watches, gold chains and necklaces, vest chains, charms and locket, sleeve buttons, men's shirt studs, pens and pencils, gold-headed canes, scarf pins, gold bracelets, ear drops, brooches, rings, silverware such as castors and napkin holders, goblets, and tea sets. In the last third (35 pages), Stark sold firearms and firearm paraphernalia. He sold revolvers, muzzle-loading shotguns, breech-loading shotguns, small

calibre 'Flobert' rifles, repeating rifles, air rifles, and gun and hunting accoutrements. In comparison, the catalogue from the late 1880s was 320 pages. It contained the same products as in 1884 but added many other items, which reflected Stark's effort to transform his business into a catalogue-based 'department' store. It included books, stationary, furniture, musical instruments, baby carriages, drugs and patent medicines, pottery, groceries, trunks and travel bags, wall paper, harnesses, carriages and buggies, stoves, boots and shoes, carpet and upholstery, curtains, corsets, clothing, umbrellas, bicycles, farm implements, carpenter tools, and sporting good items such as fishing tackle, baseball equipment, boxing gloves, toboggans, dumbbells, and tennis rackets. And guns, lots of guns. The catalogue devoted over sixty pages to them and more than thirty to related products such as yacht cannons, ammunition, hunting supplies, and police equipment. The wide variety of kinds of firearms, models, and prices reflected an effort to offer products to different market segments, including people that wanted firearms for different purposes, and people of different financial means.

Stark frequently asserted the large size and importance of his gun business. In 1880, he reported that there was "every prospect" that his company's firearms business would become "the main supply trade of Canada,"²² and in 1881 he claimed

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-64.

²¹ *Criminal Code*, S.C. 1892, c.29, s.106; R. Blake Brown, "'Pistol Fever': Regulating Revolvers in Late-Nineteenth-Century Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, n.s., 20:1 (2009), 107-138.

²² *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*, 71.



In the late 1880s, Stark's operated out of a large building on the corner of Church St. and Court St. in Toronto, opposite St. James Cathedral. The exterior of the store included many references to both of Stark's core businesses: jewelry and firearms. Note the model rifle on the exterior of the building, as well as the names of firearm manufacturers whose products Stark carried, such as Winchester, Colt, and Remington. Source: Stark's Catalogue, supplement, c. 1894.

to be the “only house in Canada keeping a complete assortment of American Sporting Rifles and Shotguns.”²³ In 1882 he reported that his firearms business had more than doubled in the previous year.²⁴ He asserted that a visitor to his Toronto store would be shown “more Fire Arms than can be seen in all Toronto, Hamilton, and

had the “Largest, Finest and Best Assorted Stock of Guns, Firearms and Revolvers of every Description IN THE WORLD.”²⁸ While such grandiose claims were likely more marketing strategy than statements of fact, they highlight that Stark believed that consumers saw value in purchasing from a large retailer offering a wide variety

London combined.”²⁵ By 1885, Stark said he was sales agent for many of the major firearm manufacturers of the period, including the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, Colt, Stevens, Marlin, Remington, and Smith & Wesson.²⁶ His claims about the size of his company’s inventory became even grander by the end of the 1880s. In 1888, he bragged that he had the “Largest Stock of Guns in Canada,” and that his company could always undersell his smaller competitors.²⁷ He then asserted in 1890 that his company

²³“\$100 00 Prize,” *Globe*, 20 August 1881. Also see “Firearms,” *Globe*, 4 February 1882.

²⁴ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1882, 67.

²⁵“Grand Excursion to Manitoba!,” *Globe*, 18 February 1882.

²⁶“English Shot Gun,” *Canada Presbyterian*, 14:37 (9 September 1885), 608.

²⁷“The Last to Throw up the Sponge,” *Forest and Farm*, 3:6 (22 December 1888), 4.

²⁸“On Hand Again,” *Canada Presbyterian*, 19:46 (12 November 1890), 738. In 1900, the business still claimed that its assortment of guns “cannot be equalled in the Dominion.” “Gun Snaps,” *Toronto World*, 20 September 1900, 3.

of stock and competitive pricing. His gun business also included doing repair work.²⁹ He reported in 1884 that the company had secured the services of skilled workers from Birmingham, and the next year said he had a gun repair shop “replete with all modern machinery.”³⁰ He later claimed that his facilities for gun repairs were “unsurpassed by any on this continent.”³¹

Stark formed a joint stock company at the end of the 1880s to help raise funds needed to expand the business. After incorporating, the company enlarged its premises on Church St., moving from 52 Church St. to a large, multi-storey brick building measuring sixty feet by 125 at the corner of Church and Court streets, where he employed approximately forty people. This physical growth was typical of other aggressive retailers of the period, who tended to expand their businesses’ physical space in a somewhat ramshackle way, until, like Timothy Eaton, they had sufficient income to build massive new retail palaces.³²

As his business expanded, Stark began to carry new products. For example, he invested heavily in bicycles. The *Toronto Star* suggested in 1899 that he

was “one of the first—if not the first—to import into Canada the high wheel bicycle.”³³ At first blush, his interest in bicycles may seem odd, given that he had specialized in firearms and jewelry. However, like both of those products, the mass-manufactured bicycle was a previously pricey item increasingly marketed to the growing middle class toward the end of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1880s, what became known as ‘safety’ bicycles appeared. These, unlike the big wheel bikes that preceded them, featured a steerable front wheel and equally sized wheels, with a pedal attached to a chain to drive the rear wheel. Safety bikes shifted public perception of bicycles as dangerous toys for the wealthy to tools for everyday transport that could be used by men and women of more modest means. Stark took advantage of a massive spike in interest in cycling in Canada, and the *Globe* suggested in early 1892 that his company was probably one of “the largest bicycle dealers in Canada, and the heaviest importers of English bicycles in America.”³⁴ *Cycling* calling the growth of his bicycle business “phenomenal,” and claimed that the com-

²⁹ *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1882, 68.

³⁰ *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1884, 105.

³¹ “Practical,” *Forest and Farm*, 3:6 (22 December 1888), 5. Also see “Gun Repairing!,” *Truth for the People*, 5:229 (21 February 1885), 25. For a detailed listing of the cost of gun repairs see *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1887, 66.

³² *Illustrated Toronto: The Queen City of Canada. Its Past, Present and Future... 1890* (Toronto: Acme Publishing and Engraving, 1890), 152; Belisle, *Retail Nation*, 19; “Manufacturing,” *Canadian Manufacturer and Industrial World*, 15:11 (7 December 1888), 400; *Canadian Journal of Commerce, Finance and Insurance Review*, 28:6 (8 February 1889), 226; *The Monetary Times, Trade Review and Insurance Chronicle*, 23:2 (12 July 1889); *Canadian Manufacturer and Industrial World*, 17:2 (19 July 1889), 51. For a description of the layout of Stark’s store in 1892 see “Trade Notes,” *Cycling*, 2:7 (25 February 1892), 86.

³³ “Mr. Stark is Dead,” *Toronto Star*, 21 June 1899.

³⁴ “The Chas. Stark Co.,” *Globe*, 2 March 1892; “The ‘Psycho’ Safety,” *Canadian Militia Gazette*, 5:31



This image of the sales room of Stark's highlights the company's houseware, watch, and firearms business. Source: *Stark's Catalogue, supplement*, c.1894.

pany had transformed "from a tolerably small concern" into "the largest sporting goods house in the Dominion, which, we may safely say, is second to none on the American continent" with business that "extends from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island."³⁵ However, Stark appears to have had difficulty selling all of the bicycles he acquired, forcing him to offer deep discounts, and in the early 1890s he ran into severe financial trouble. By 1892 the business media reported that he had been unable to make payments on liabili-

ties, and in 1893 he began to operate as a sole proprietor, focusing on the mail order business. His financial troubles continued, however, leading to lawsuits over debts, and restructuring. Stark persisted in his retail pursuits, and the company continued after his death in 1899, though it seemed to be a shell of its former self. Stark's moved from Church St to 232 Yonge St., and the business closed in 1905, selling off its remaining stock of goods to another company.³⁶ The company's struggles highlight that catalogue

(31 July 1890), 245; "Stark's Bicycles," *Grip*, 38:17 (23 April 1892). Also see "The Bicycle and its Future," *Globe*, 13 April 1892; Glen Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

³⁵ "Trade Notes," *Cycling*, 1:7 (25 February 1891), 54.

³⁶ "Stark's Bicycles," *Canadian Churchman and Dominion Churchman*, 18:14 (7 April 1892), 210; *Cycling*, 2:18 (August 1892), 311; *Globe*, 17 January 1893; "Re Charles Stark," *Globe*, 11 January 1893;

sales were not a panacea for the retail industry.

Stark's Firearms

Three types of firearms featured in Stark's business: handguns, shotguns, and rifles. Handguns were a significant part of his trade. For example, his 1884 catalogue offered twenty models of revolvers made by several gun makers, including Colt, Harrington & Richardson, Smith & Wesson, Remington, and Merwin, Hulbert & Co. The catalogue from the late 1880s included approximately twice as many models of revolvers. Stark's sold some small, short-barrelled revolvers such as the 'Bull Dog', often referred to as 'pocket pistols' for the obvious reason that they could easily be carried in a pocket. Some models came with two interchangeable barrels, one long and one short. Advertised in 1887 was a Merwin, Hulbert & Co. revolver with a five and half inch barrel; it also came with "an interchangeable 3-inch barrel, that enables it to be changed into a Pocket Revolver."³⁷ The barrel could be exchanged in three seconds with no tools. In the late 1880s, Stark also sold Remington's 'Derringer' pistol—a tiny handgun that held two rounds; it became infamous for mis-

use.³⁸

The cost of Stark's handguns varied depending on the model, firing mechanism, calibre, and upgrades, but some were cheap enough to be widely affordable. Prices for revolvers in the 1880 catalogue ranged from \$1.95 for a .22 calibre to \$30 for a Smith & Wesson. In the 1884 catalogue prices had dropped: from 90 cents for a .22 calibre no-name revolver that could hold seven rounds to a .44 calibre Merwin, Hulbert & Co. that sold for \$25. Revolver prices stayed steady in the late 1880s, when the least expensive sold for just 90 cents, and several other models sold for less than \$2.³⁹

Stark also carried an extensive collection of shotguns firing cartridges filled with pellets. These provided a better chance of hitting moving targets, such as flying birds, at relatively short ranges. Gun makers produced shotguns with one or two barrels. Like other firearms, shotguns were initially loaded through the muzzle. However, in the nineteenth century, gun makers began to produce breechloading shotguns that used self-contained shotgun shells. The typical design of the 1880s had a 'break' hinge that dropped the barrel or barrels away from the breech, allowing the shooter

"Verdict for \$12,000," *London Advertiser*, 15 June 1893; *Monetary Times, Trade Review and Insurance Chronicle*, 28:48 (31 May 1895), 1543; *Globe*, 29 June 1895; "Clarkson v. Stark," *Globe*, 28 April 1896; "Cases at Osgoode Hall," *Toronto World*, 5 March 1896; "At Osgoode Hall," *Toronto Star*, 4 March 1896; "Clarkson v. Stark," *Barrister*, 2 (1896), 164; *The Monetary Times, Trade Review and Insurance Chronicle*, 28:52 (28 June 1895), 1679; "Special Bargains in Bicycles...", *Toronto World*, 19 June 1899; "Closed," *Toronto World*, 26 May 1905; "Sporting Goods," *Toronto World*, 1 June 1905.

³⁷ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 50.

³⁸ *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 233.

³⁹ *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*, 74, 79; *Stark's 1884 Catalogue*, 77, 84; *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 243-245.



Stark carried many models of revolvers. Industrial manufacturing had reduced their price, making cheap handguns, such as this 'British Bull Dog', affordable for a wide swath of the public. Source: Stark's Catalogue, c.1889, 237.

the most expensive revolvers and rifles. The priciest firearm in the 1884 catalogue was a shotgun produced by W. & C. Scott & Sons that retailed for \$200.

to reload new cartridges. There was a diverse market for shotguns. Farmers bought them, as did some fowl hunters, and trap shooters who fired at either clay pigeons or live birds such as pigeons or sparrows. Stark himself was a fan of bird shoots. In 1888, he presented a cup for competitors at the Toronto hotelkeepers' shoot, and the press reported several events at his shooting grounds.⁴⁰ The 1884 catalogue, featured shotguns from several American and British manufacturers such as Colt, Remington, Parker, Pieper, J.P. Clabrough & Bro., and W.W. Greener. It offered a modest number of inexpensive muzzle-loading shotguns, some for under five dollars including one for three-dollars that was "a good gun for farm use."⁴¹ On the other hand, Stark also targeted wealthy buyers, selling some shotguns at prices that dwarfed those of

W.W. Greener shotguns sold for almost as much, including one for \$175.⁴² In the late 1880s, Stark's sold more models of W.W. Greener shotguns, calling them "the best guns of English manufacture."⁴³ The most expensive, however, was a double-barreled Baker listed for the immense sum of \$300.⁴⁴ These high-grade shotguns often had extensive decorations, with intricate engravings and high-grade woods.

Rifles were the third major type of firearm sold by Stark. As with revolvers and shotguns, the company carried several brands, including Spencer, Stevens, Remington, Ballard, and Winchester. Many of these manufacturers had developed and marketed repeating rifles that held ammunition in magazines. For example, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company's Model 1866 used a 'lever ac-

⁴⁰ "The Hotel Cup," *Globe*, 10 May 1888; "Canadian Trap Shooters," *Forest and Stream*, 39 (4 August 1892); "The Trigger," *Globe*, 27 February 1893.

⁴¹ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 86.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴³ *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 182.

⁴⁴ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 18, 196.

Stark's sold many models of shotguns. The company marketed inexpensive models for farm use, while targeting wealthy 'sportsmen' with pricier models, such as those produced by English manufacturer W.W. Greener. Note the intricate design which made the firearm an appealing consumer item that bestowed status on the purchaser. Source: Stark's catalogue, c.1889, 182.



tion' to reload. This was followed with other models using similar designs, including the Model 1873, Model 1876, and Model 1886.⁴⁵ Stark took pride in carrying Winchester rifles, saying in 1882 that they had a "world-wide reputation," and were unrivaled for distance, accuracy, and penetration.⁴⁶ Stark carried the 1866 and 1873 models in the 1884 catalogue which advertised the basic former model for \$20; the 1873 model was slightly more, \$22.50. By the late 1880s, the prices had been slashed. The basic 1866 model was \$15, the 1873 model had dropped to \$16.20, while the even new 1886 model sold for just \$19.50.⁴⁷

Stark also sold several unusual weapons such as guns with two barrels—one a rifle and the other a shotgun. He also offered a small number of rifles with detachable stocks designed to be more mobile than regular guns. These includ-

ed 'pocket rifles'. One was a .32 calibre pocket rifle that held five rounds with a detachable stock, which was described as "light and compact," and "can be instantly taken apart to carry in the pocket."⁴⁸ He also sold a Steven's "bicycle rifle" suitable for "touring or vacation trips."⁴⁹ It was a single-shot weapon that looked like a handgun with an extra-long barrel and a detachable stock. It came with a leather case that could be swung across the back. In 1887, you could buy Remington rifle canes for personal defence. These held a single round of ammunition, and were designed to "serve the double purpose of a handsome and convenient walking-stick and an arm for self-defence or shooting small game."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Laura Trevelyan, *The Winchester: The Gun that Built an American Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 41-43; Haag, *The Gunning of America*, 53-64, 101-102.

⁴⁶ "Firearms," *Globe*, 4 April 1882.

⁴⁷ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 101-102; *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 210-212.

⁴⁸ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 98. Also see *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 60.

⁴⁹ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 96. Also see *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 30; *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 207.

⁵⁰ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 27.

Winchester Repeating Rifles.

These weapons are well known to every sportsman; their popularity and enormous sale is a guarantee of their merit. We offer them at prices far lower than they were ever sold before.

The system and operation of the Winchester is easily understood. It is operated by simply throwing down the guard, which extracts the old shell from the chamber, throwing it off at the top, cocks the hammer, and places a new cartridge in the firing chamber. The motion may be executed while the gun is at the shoulder without taking the eye from the sights, thus enabling the firer to discharge two or more shots without removing the gun from the shoulder or losing sight of the object it is desired to hit.



Stark carried many models of repeating rifles which gained popularity in last third of the nineteenth century because they could fire several rounds of ammunition quickly and accurately at much longer distances than most long guns available earlier in the century. Stark's frequently asserted that it could offer Winchester rifles to 'sportsmen' at prices lower than competitors. Source: Stark's Catalogue, c.1889, 210.

Stark's Firearm Marketing

Stark employed several sales techniques. As noted earlier, he often claimed to have the largest stock of firearms and that he could offer them cheaply due to the volume of his sales. In 1882, he said he had 3,000 firearms in stock.⁵¹ He explained: "The secret of our selling cheap is simply that we buy directly from the Manufacturers in Europe and the United States for cash, and in larger quantities than any other importing House in the Dominion."⁵² This meant that consumers did not have to pay for the "middleman's percentage." In September 1885, Stark claimed that his

business represented seven-tenths of all the guns imported into Canada in the previous three months, and that he sold firearms for "one-third the price asked for the same goods by competitors five years ago."⁵³ In 1890, he boasted that he had 5,000 firearms in stock, all at the lowest prices.⁵⁴

Stark emphasized the modern technology of firearms in his appeals to consumers. While he advertised some single-shot rifles (including a "car-load" of muzzle-loading Springfield and Enfield military rifles in 1880), he often noted the high rate of fire of modern firearms.⁵⁵ His 1882 catalogue, for example, pointed

⁵¹ "Firearms," *Globe*, 4 April 1882; "Stark's Guns," *Globe*, 26 August 1882.

⁵² "Firearms," *Globe*, 7 June 1882.

⁵³ *Globe*, 9 September 1885.

⁵⁴ "On Hand Again," *Canada Presbyterian*, 19:46 (12 November 1890), 738.

⁵⁵ *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*, 82. Also see "500 Military Rifles," *Globe*, 11 October 1879.

potential customers to the Winchester rifle's rate of fire: "A weapon that will kill sixteen Fenians in as many seconds without reloading can be better used to kill bear, deer, and buffaloes in the North-West."⁵⁶ In 1885, he advertised a Colt rifle that "Fires 15 Shots in 5 Seconds."⁵⁷ In 1887, Stark sold a pump-action Spencer repeating shotgun, announcing that it "Will Fire SIX TIMES in THREE SECONDS Without Removing the Gun from the Shoulder."⁵⁸ Also advertised was the rapid rate of fire of revolvers. Stark told potential buyers of a Bull Dog revolver, for example, that it could fire seven shots in five seconds.⁵⁹ He noted that these modern, factory-built guns also had interchangeable parts, making them (much like factory-made watches) easier to repair and suggesting the precision and quality achieved by their industrial fabrication.⁶⁰

Settlers moving to the Canadian west were targeted in advertisements; in the early 1880s he encouraged settlers to take a Winchester rifle or shotgun to the Northwest, where he said firearms were more expensive.⁶¹ Stark, however, appears to have abandoned this marketing strategy by the late 1880s, by which time he was using the expanding rail network

to sell his firearms in the west.

Stark's marketing also emphasized the beauty of many of his firearms, portraying them as attractive, not simply tools. Model names were meant to create a bond between consumers and firearms. In 1887, pistols were given evocative names suggesting the power they bestowed on their owners, such as Ranger, Dictator, and Emperor.⁶² The 'Emperor' revolver was the "most beautiful weapon and the most accurate shooter ever sold in Canada at the price." It was made of the "finest English steel" and the frame and barrel were carefully nickel-plated, while the cylinder was "*heavy gold plated*." It was also "engraved and beautifully enamelled," making it "the handsomest revolver in the market."⁶³ Purchasers had the option to upgrade or modify many of Stark's firearms. Some of these modifications affected the capability of the firearm, such as ordering a firearm with a longer or shorter barrel. Many, however, were aesthetic, allowing gun owners to personalize their weapons or make them more visually appealing. This included upgraded stocks or handles made of more expensive woods such as ebony or adding ivory.⁶⁴ Some guns could be engraved or gilded. Stark's background as a jeweller meant that he knew the im-

⁵⁶ "Firearms," *Globe*, 4 April 1882.

⁵⁷ "Winchester Repeating Rifles again Reduced," *Globe*, 18 April 1885.

⁵⁸ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁰ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 84; *Stark's Catalogue*, c.1889, 227, 236.

⁶¹ "Firearms," *Globe*, 7 June 1882; "Grand Excursion to Manitoba!," *Globe*, 18 February 1882; "Manitoba Lands," *Globe*, 18 February 1882.

⁶² *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 62-63.

⁶³ *Stark's Catalogue*, 1884, 78.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Stark's Catalogue*, 1887, 38, 41.

portance of aesthetics in driving sales. His emphasis on beauty was similar to the efforts of other large retailers to shape consumers' desires following a pattern common in the late nineteenth century. This was part of a transition "from imagining a customer who needed guns but didn't especially want them to a customer who wanted guns but didn't especially need them."⁶⁵ Purchasing an attractive firearm promised to provide confidence, happiness, or a sense of individuality. As Canada's leading historian of department stores, Donica Belisle, notes, large retailers "portrayed goods as signifiers of social position."⁶⁶ Or, as Keith Walden concludes, late Victorian businesses in Toronto attempted to persuade individuals that "personal identity depended not on geography, family background, religious values, occupation, or similar things, but on choices made among consumer goods found in the market-place."⁶⁷ Stark's advertising suggested that owning an expensive and intricately-designed shotgun, a sleek modern rifle, or a revolver with a handle decorated in ivory was a means of expressing one's individuality.

But Stark also highlighted guns that were particularly functional, often noting their suitability for hunting. In doing so, he took advantage of, and encour-

aged, a growing interest in recreational sport hunting in the late nineteenth century. Sport hunting, as opposed to subsistence hunting, expanded from an upper-class activity to one open to the growing middle class, and hordes of men living in urban areas began to undertake hunting trips. Advocates of this stressed exercise, entertainment, male bonding, and a chance to develop shootings skills that were potentially useful in future military conflicts. Many urban men thought hunting buttressed their identity as self-reliant, resourceful, and skilled risk takers. Hunting allowed men to escape cities and towns and assert their masculinity while hunting deer, moose, or other animals; or, as Tina Loo puts it, a means of asserting "bourgeois masculinity."⁶⁸ Recreational hunters looked down on subsistence hunters, in particular Indigenous Peoples, and believed that wildlife should be preserved for sport hunting.⁶⁹ In response to this, Stark marketed directly to sport hunters, actual or potential. This was a lucrative trade since hunters also bought ammunition and accoutrements such as gun cases, bags, cartridge belts and cases, pocket compasses, gun cleaning tools, pistol holsters, gun sights, firearm parts, tools for making cartridges, hunting knives, duck calls, lanterns, pow-

⁶⁵ Haag, *The Gunning of America*, xix.

⁶⁶ Belisle, *Retail Nation*, 70.

⁶⁷ Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 125.

⁶⁸ Tina Loo, "Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia, 1880-1939," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 32:3 (2001), 296.

⁶⁹ David Calverley, *Who Controls the Hunt? First Nations, Treaty Rights, and Wildlife Conservation in Ontario, 1783-1939* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 31-39.

der flasks, telescopes, and ammunition.

Stark also marketed some guns for target shooting. Rifle competitions emerged as a popular sport in the mid nineteenth century. Changing technology contributed to this, as rifled firearms allowed for accurate shooting at long ranges. Governments encouraged target shooting, as some military planners believed that a well-trained citizenry using modern rifles could effectively defend against a more numerous enemy, a popular idea given the recurring threat of United States aggression. Rifle competitions were often tied to military service, but many civilians also took part, and Stark catered to them.⁷⁰ In 1880, Stark claimed that expert target shooters using a Ballard rifle had improved their shooting scores. He marketed a Remington rifle in 1884 as “designed especially for long range target shooting.” He also sold an expensive “long range Creedmoor rifle” specially designed for shooting competitions.⁷¹

Stark marketed some small calibre rifles and air rifles as ‘parlor’ or ‘gallery’ guns for short-range target shooting, including indoor shooting, in urban ar-

eas. Air rifles used pressurized air, rather than chemical propellants, to fire darts or small slugs. The air guns sold in Stark’s catalogues were initially quite expensive. In 1880, he offered the ‘Excelsior’ for eighteen dollars, claiming that “For Parlor or Lawn [it] has no equal.”⁷² By the late 1880s, prices of air rifles had dropped somewhat, ranging from eight to ten dollars (retailers later sold new models of cheap air rifles as toys for boys, including Stark, who offered one for just three dollars in 1890).⁷³ Such weapons made recreational target shooting easier in urban settings.⁷⁴ For example, in 1887, Stark said of the H.M. Quackenbush air rifle that there was “no gun made which pleases the ladies and children more, and gives them the instruction and entertainment that this one does;” it was “well made, beautifully finished, durable, and will be an ornament to the finest drawing room.”⁷⁵ The Quackenbush was sent with everything needed for shooting in one’s parlour or on one’s property, including darts, slugs, and paper targets. Stark said air rifles could also be used to kill pests or drive off irritating animals. In

⁷⁰ Kevin Wamsley, “Cultural Signification and National Ideologies: Rifle-shooting in Late 19th Century Canada,” *Social History*, 20 (1995), 63-72; R. Blake Brown, *Arming and Disarming: A History of Gun Control in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Osgoode Society, 2012), 50; R. Blake Brown, “The State and Organized Rifle Shooting in Nova Scotia in the 1860s,” *Borealia*, 24 August 2020, <<https://earlycanadianhistory.ca/2020/08/24/the-state-and-organized-rifle-shooting-in-nova-scotia-in-the-1860s/>>; *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*, 83.

⁷¹ *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1884, 97. Also see *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1887, 28.

⁷² *Rogers Manufacturing Co., 1880 Catalogue*, 80.

⁷³ “100 Shots for One Cent,” *Canadian Churchman and Dominion Churchman*, 16:27 (3 July 1890), 431.

⁷⁴ R. Blake Brown, ““Every boy ought to learn to shoot and to obey orders’: Guns, Boys, and the Law in Canada from the late Nineteenth Century to the Great War,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 93:2 (2012), 196-226.

⁷⁵ *Stark’s Catalogue*, 1887, 26.

the late 1880s, for example, he described one air rifle as “just the thing to make the neighbor’s cat ‘scratch gravel,’ and dog fly home, and for killing English sparrows, cherry birds, rats, gophers, etc.”⁷⁶

Stark marketed revolvers as useful for personal protection or the defence of property. He made this case in 1880: “Owing to the number of highway robberies, burglaries, &c., now an everyday occurrence, it is the DUTY of every man to see that his house is protected” with a firearm. Stark thus employed gender to market his firearms, highlighting men as the defenders of their homes, property, and families. However, he also said that “Every LADY should be taught how to use one, in case of emergency,”⁷⁷ suggesting that they would be able to defend themselves, their children, and property if men were absent. The 1880 catalogue included an advertisement for “Colt’s House Defence Revolver,” and claimed another pistol was a “first-class weapon for defence” as its six chambers could be discharged in as many seconds and its size “makes it convenient for the pocket.”⁷⁸ This emphasis on the defence of property was significant. Much of Stark’s non-firearm business was the peddling of mass-produced, though often still relatively expensive, decorative jewelry and housewares that filled middle-class and upper-class Canadian homes in the 1880s and 1890s. The owners of these items wanted

to protect them from thieves, and Stark’s revolvers could provide a sense of safety at a time when urban police forces were of modest effectiveness. Thus, at first glance firearms, jewelry, and expensive housewares may seem like an odd combination of items for Stark to sell. They were, however, very much related: a handgun could be used to protect silverware or a gold watch from a burglar.

Selling revolvers posed potential public relations problems for Stark. There were substantial concerns about the easy availability of revolvers in Canada in the late nineteenth century, and revolvers were involved in many accidental shootings. As well, critics said revolvers could be used for criminal acts, and were carried by young men as a means of asserting their masculinity. Some politicians and newspaper editors warned that the selling of cheap revolvers allowed too many men to walk about town carrying small, concealable weapons that could quickly fire several rounds of ammunition. Allegations that firearms bought at Stark’s were misused could stir up bad press for the business. For example, in 1889 the press reported that a middle-aged clerk in Toronto might have used a revolver he purchased from Stark’s to commit suicide, leaving his five children fatherless.⁷⁹

Stark responded to these concerns in several ways. He pointed to the safety features of some guns. For instance, in

⁷⁶ *Stark’s Catalogue, 1884*, 100.

⁷⁷ *Rogers Manufacturing Co. Catalogue, 1880*, 71.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

⁷⁹ Brown, “Pistol Fever,” 107-138; “’Twas Dire Self-Murder,” *Toronto World*, 17 October 1889; “A Toronto Tragedy,” *Ottawa Daily Citizen*, 17 October 1889.

the late 1880s Stark suggested that the design of new Smith & Wesson 'hammerless' revolvers made them safer than other firearms. He acknowledged that the "great number of accidents recorded during the past years, in the use and handling of revolvers," had "made it evident that some decided change in this arm, by which these accidents shall be avoided, is not only desirable but necessary." Smith & Wesson had responded by producing a 'hammerless' revolver, making the hammer internal to the firearm. This, said Stark, would avoid the many accidents caused by the negligent manipulation of the hammer, such as when the gun owner's thumb slipped off the hammer while cocking, or was accidentally left at full cock. Stark claimed that the hammerless design could only be fired deliberately, making the revolver safe around children ("no ordinary child under eight years of age can possibly discharge it"), and the weapon could be carried with as little danger "as if it were a block of wood."⁸⁰ Stark declared other hammerless revolvers as safe, including a Forehand & Wadsworth model: "It is absolutely a safe arm in every respect."⁸¹ An Ivor Johnson revolver was said to be safe because it was "impossible to operate the trigger until the finger is in position to fire."⁸² To emphasize safety in the early 1890s, the company offered a

free one-year accident insurance policy to anyone who purchased a gun (or bicycle or watch), a "feature in business never attempted in the Dominion of Canada by any firm."⁸³

Stark tapped into other aspects of popular culture to drive sales. For instance, he employed the Christmas season to sell firearms. In December 1888, he urged customers to buy "Useful and Staple Articles," for farmers' sons and young men, saying that a double-barrelled breech-loading shotgun was a perfect holiday gift. In the 1880s, Stark also used British imperial imagery to sell rifles. Beginning in 1883, several advertisements included a reproduction of an 1875 painting by Elizabeth Thompson entitled *The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras*. The painting portrayed the Battle of Quatre Bras of 1815, which occurred a few days before the Battle of Waterloo. The reproduction showed a regiment fending off an attack by French cavalry. In 1883, Stark included a caption to the image, saying "All these Noble Warriors are armed with Stark's Celebrated Guns."⁸⁴ In 1885, he altered the caption slightly, saying "All the noble warriors are armed with Stark's Celebrated Guns, ready and willing to do battle for Country and Country's cause."⁸⁵ The 1885 caption was perhaps intended to draw upon feelings of nationalism in

⁸⁰ *Stark's Catalogue, c.1889*, 224.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁸² *Stark's Catalogue, c.1894, Supplement*, 9.

⁸³ "Free! Free! Free!", *Grip*, 37:10 (5 September 1891). Also see "Speaking about Insurance," *Globe*, 14 September 1891.

⁸⁴ *Globe*, 3 March 1883

⁸⁵ *Globe*, 9 September 1885.

English Canada in the immediate aftermath of the Northwest Rebellion.

Stark tried to expand the firearms market by advertising some guns as particularly suitable for boys or women. In 1882, for example, he called a light shotgun a “Boy’s Gun,”⁸⁶ while in 1888 he advertised a “Boy’s Rifle”—an air rifle that could fire noiselessly and accurately up to fifty yards that was “Certain death to cats.”⁸⁷ His catalogue from the late 1880s offered “Ladies’ Rifles”. In marketing firearms to women, Stark suggested that women could take part in leisurely target shooting pursuits. The ladies’ rifle was described as “splendidly balanced, light weight and especially adapted for ladies’ use.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

Charles Stark was one of Canada’s most innovative retailers in the 1880s and 1890s. He established an ambitious catalogue businesses before the more famous Timothy Eaton, though he would not have the same long-term success, highlighting the fact that using the catalogue sales technique was no guarantee of long-term financial success. Stark’s beautifully illustrated and lengthy catalogues dwarfed Eaton’s early efforts. Stark sold mass-produced products, such as bicycles, watches, and firearms. However, he failed to cement his company’s position as a leading department-store catalogue retailer. Financial difficulties forced him to retreat to his well-es-

lished core businesses of jewelry and firearms in 1890s, while Eaton expanded and solidified his position as Toronto’s leading retailer.

Stark’s gun business proved successful because of his sales techniques, changing firearm manufacturing and technology, and the evolving use of guns in the late nineteenth century. Mass produced weapons such as the Winchester rifle and Smith & Wesson revolver became well-known brands and appealing consumer goods. Men living in Canada’s growing urban centres often did not need a rifle for practical purposes, but Stark urged them to buy firearms for activities like recreational sport hunting or competitive target shooting. Stark also encouraged urban men to purchase revolvers as a sign of manliness or for personal protection or the defence of property. His long experience in selling jewelry and watches—products of desire rather than need—helped him market and sell guns. He understood the consumer’s interest in purchasing items of beauty, not just function, leading him to show attractive images of the firearms in his catalogue and to allow consumers to purchase decorated shotguns or to upgrade weapons for aesthetic reasons. He also understood that Canadians might want firearms to protect the (often garish) housewares that filled their Victorian homes and the fancy pocket watches and jewelry they wore about town.

⁸⁶ *Stark’s Catalogue*, c.1882, 74.

⁸⁷ “Practical,” *Forest and Farm*, 3:6 (22 December 1888), 5.

⁸⁸ *Stark’s Catalogue*, c.1889, 206. On efforts to market firearms to women in the United States see Laura Browder, *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).