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## **W. Martin Hill**

### **THE SUMMER OF 58**

In the summer of 1958, I was a skinny 22 year old firearms enthusiast about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime. A friend, and my idol in the gun business, Val Forgett Jr. had invited me to work full time at his fledgling gun company in Bogota, New Jersey. Forgett was rapidly becoming one of the largest firearms dealers in the U.S. and the chance to work as his assistant and learn the business from the top was indeed a great opportunity. I anticipated my employment would consist of helping Val run the store, type letters, clean the place up, and in general be his "Right Hand Man" dealing strictly with the functions of the mail order and retail store. I had no idea, at the time, what an incredible adventure lay before me that summer.

Upon my arrival in New Jersey, I could tell something was in the air; there were rumors flying, and meetings going on between Val and some people in New York; something about Bannerman's Island. Soon I was informed of the details; Val Forgett had entered into a contract with Francis Bannerman & Sons to remove all explosive shells and ordinance from the island. Anything considered dangerous was to be deactivated or removed down to the last round, and incredibly, I was to move to the island to take charge of the project during those times when Val had to be at the store. In short, I was to be a resident of Bannerman's Castle for the summer.

As is the case with most gun collectors and historians, the only thing I knew about Bannerman's Island was what I had seen in the famous Bannermans catalogue; copies of which were on the bookshelves of every arms dealer and collector in the world. The true mystery and the historical significance of the old building and its treasures would become apparent soon.

The adventure began that first morning at a small boat landing area about a half mile down river from the island. You could see the castle in the background; it looked ancient, and it looked large, even from half a mile away. We had just arrived when a small outboard boat carrying two men arrived. They introduced themselves; I remember one who apparently was the caretaker of the island was named Joe; the other was the superintendent of Bannerman's Island; I can't recall his name. The trip to the island took only a few minutes and I remember my excitement as the little outboard entered the basin area between two stone towers. I was unloaded and taken up the walkway under the suspended iron gate to the 5th floor where there were living quarters. I had my own room and my own kerosene lantern. I met Joe's wife, who along with the caretaker, would feed and look after me during my stay.

As expected, the castle was exciting and mysterious; there were vast cavernous rooms containing the remnants of wars long past, and it was commonplace to even stumble on artifacts from the Civil War. One room contained thousands of haversacks from the Spanish American War; another room on the sixth floor contained large wooden crates filled with brand new Bengal Lancer Pithe Helmets. Every day I would go up to the 6th floor and open the crate filled with the size 6 7/8 hats, select a brand new one still wrapped in tissue paper and in an original pasteboard box, wear it all day in the sun while digging up Civil War projectiles. At the end of the day, I would discard the helmet and replace it with another new one the next day. "Familiarity breeds contempt". Another area on the upper floor was filled with artillery and Gatling Gun carriages; these had been stored in the dry since the early 1900s and were still in very good to excellent condition. The ground level rooms in the main castle area were packed with crates of small arms ammunition and artillery shells, still loaded, and still functional. The large storage area at ground level on the right side of the castle contained approximately 300,000 rounds of 45/70 cartridges in 1000 round cases. these crates had gotten wet some time ago and had been laid out on the floor to dry out. Inside the cases were 20 round paper boxes of ammunition, still sealed, and marked: REMINGTON UMC 45/70 500 grain bullet. This ammo had been wet and was probably 50 years old. We took some samples out to the range and although the stuff would hang fire, it would still shoot. This was the standard issue round for the American Armed Forces from the 1870s to the early 1900s. Although intended for use in the Gatling Gun, these cartridges would also function in the service rifles of the era.

On the ground floor in the center area of the castle was a large room containing my job for the summer. There was approximately 40,000 rounds of 37mm and 40mm Hotchkiss Cannon ammunition. The 37mm rounds were all base detonating with a small amount of black powder in the projectile. In the base of the projectile was the fuze and detonator. Upon close examination of the construction of the round, it was determined the shells were safe to handle and deactivate. The fuzes and the powder were removed and for decades after that, these deactivated Hotchkiss rounds were showing up at gun shows and antique stores as collectors items. Probably a thousand or more of these shells were disarmed and sold a souvenirs. The bulk of the munitions scheduled for deactivation were 1.6 or 40mm rounds. These shells were made for the Hotchkiss Mountain Gun, and came in several types. There were point detonating, base detonating, and cannister rounds. They were packed in zinc corrugated cans each containing 24 rounds with two of these cans per wooden crate. Val had designed and built a device for safely removing the projectiles from these live rounds. This bullet pulling device consisted of a large, rubber tired wheel, a steel plate with a hole in it just large enough to allow the live shell to be inserted, and a clamping device to clamp down on the projectile. With the projectile clamped, you simply turned the wheel and the bullet was safely drawn from the casing. The device worked well, but it was a lot of work, and it took a lot of time to insert, clamp, and withdraw the projectiles from the shells. With nearly

40,000 rounds of this ammo to deactivate, the effort got tiresome quickly. I had, early in the project, taken the time to examine the design and construction of the 40mm rounds and I was familiar with the fuze system I would be handling. Although somewhat primitive and simple, the mechanism was safe; these shells would not detonate unless fired in a gun. One day, while tediously using the bullet pulling machine in the hot sun and becoming increasingly frustrated at the slow pace of my efforts, I took one of the shells and struck it sharply against the metal plate containing the hole where the rounds were inserted. Taking the projectile in my hand, I pulled, and with very little effort the bullet slid out of the casing. I discovered I could dismantle a live round in seconds with a fraction of the time and effort of the machine. This all occurred during the week when I was alone with the project and Val was busy at the store. When he arrived on the weekend to check on my progress, he was impressed at how many 40mm shells I had dismantled, and he was pleased his machine was working so well. When I demonstrated my new technique of pulling the projectiles, I thought he was going to have a heart attack! It was about this time a major decision was about to be made concerning the dismantling operation.

Two of Val's closet friends, John Maeder and Jack Malloy, frequented the island that summer, and over the weeks became fascinated with the project. Among these three young adventurers the inevitable question began to emerge: "Do you think this stuff will still shoot?". The ammo, according to dates on the fuzes, had been loaded in 1898, the shells were clean and dry, and we knew the powder was still stable and good. Val had a mint Hotchkiss Mountain Gun in the 40mm caliber on display in the store. Malloy had a family farm with hundreds of acres somewhere in Pennsylvania. We decided it would be interesting to test these munitions to see if they would still function. One weekend, we pulled out the Hotchkiss, dismantled the carriage for easy transport, selected a can of each of the three types of 40mm ammunition, and headed for Pennsylvania in a well loaded station wagon. When we arrived at Jack's farm, the air bristled with excitement as we assembled the gun carriage and carefully mounted the barrel and breech to it. We settled on a range of about 300 yards from the cannon to a large dead hardwood tree, shooting over a slight valley with sufficient hill to provide a safe backstop. I had spent hours back at the shop cleaning the barrel and breech to remove ancient grease so the piece would work properly. We did not know what to expect; whether the ammunition would fire, or if the whole thing was a wasted effort. The gun, for some reason, had no sights; the only way to aim at the tree was to open the breech and bore sight through the barrel. It was a team effort with everyone involved. The selected shooter would open the breech, lie down behind the gun and sight through the barrel; the other team members would then move the barrel up or down, left or right until the tree could be seen dead center in the bore. We tied a rope to the firing trigger to put some distance between the shooter and the Hotchkiss. John Maeder was up first; he carefully aligned the barrel with the target, inserted a base detonating round, and closed the breech.



Everybody took cover, I held my ears and waited for the blast. John pulled the cord and "click"; nothing happened; it had misfired. We were all disappointed. As we stood around wondering what to do next, John rotated the breech, which recocked the mechanism, and pulled the cord again. Unlike before when we were all hiding behind trees anticipating the big blast, this time we were all standing fairly close to the gun just milling about when the old cannon roared to life with a thunderous explosion that could be heard for miles. The gun rolled back about 20 feet and we saw large chunks of the old tree blown into the sky; it had been a direct hit. We spent another few hours testing the Hotchkiss, and it became a part of the drill to simply load, cock, and click the mechanism and cock the piece again to actually fire it. We later discovered there was nothing at all wrong with the ammunition, the problem was I had not degreased the firing system sufficiently, the result being a layer of grease in the firing pin hole which cushioned the impact of the firing pin on the primer. To finish the day off, we rolled the cannon up to the farm house where we blasted away with cannister rounds at point blank range. We could hear glass breaking on the other side of the building as the lead balls tore through the structure. It was a great thrill for all of us to actually fire this antique cannon with original ammunition loaded 60 years before.

With the successful test firing of the Hotchkiss ammunition, it was decided to remove the rest of the shells intact. Val reasoned we could always dismantle the rounds and sell them as collector's items, but as live rounds they could be used in demonstration firings, blank rounds could be fashioned by removing the projectiles and altering the powder charges, and it would be cheaper to haul the material out rather than spend the rest of the summer unloading them one at a time. I recall it took a week or more to haul out the nearly 40,000 rounds of ammo. We had a tractor trailer truck parked on the dock at Cold Springs and we would use the old Bannerman World War II landing craft to ferry the munitions down the river.

During this time I was an amateur photographer, and I spent much of that summer shooting 35mm black and white still pictures and color 16mm movie film to document my experiences on the island. I ended up shooting hundreds of still pictures; I would get the film processed with a contact strip showing a positive of each negative; I would notch the negatives where I wanted prints made, and I would take the negatives to the local drug store to have the work done. Unfortunately only a fraction of the pictures shot were ever printed, and sadly, we believe the negatives were thrown out during a cleanup which occurred while I was away in the Army during the early 1960s. My only documentation of the adventure is in a tattered scrapbook of small prints I had made in 1958 when I was working on the project. There was also only one roll of 16mm color film that shows a few good scenes of the castle and the loading of the ammo at Cold Springs.

During the dismantling process that summer, someone had discovered a quantity of really old Hotchkiss 37mm ammunition stored in one of the rear areas of the castle. These shells were the ancient coiled case type which were made by wrapping brass around a mandrell and soldering the base on. You could see a coiled seam of metal running the full length of the shell. As I remember, the fuse was in the point of the projectile. This ammunition was extremely corroded and unstable; it had been stored badly and was extensively deteriorated. It was decided these shells were not safe to deactivate and the decision was made to discard them in a pit of water located in a grassy area at the front of the castle. I believe there were about 900 rounds to dispose of. The caretaker, Joe, and I used a wheelbarrow to haul the rusty, leaking shells to the site where we disposed of them in about an hour. The water was fairly deep, maybe 10 feet or so, and I am sure these rounds still reside there, probably submerged deep in the mud at the bottom of this pit which we named "The Underwater Magazine".

The area around the castle was covered in the largest, healthiest vines of poison ivy I have ever seen. It was everywhere and I had to work in it to remove the Civil War cannon balls and projectiles. Fortunately, I was fairly immune to the stuff and only contracted a mild case late in the project. I spent about a week digging up various types of artillery projectiles and round balls, many still loaded; the area was a patch of grass and poison ivy located just behind the Admiral Farragut Cannon which was located just forward of the castle on the right side facing the building. The giant gun pointed out over the edge of the wall and was aimed up the Hudson River. The story was the weapon was a deck cannon from Admiral Farragut's flag ship.

During those weeks when I lived in the castle, I had abundant opportunity to explore the island. One day while following some of the paths, I came upon the summer house of the Bannerman's. I recall a 6 pounder Civil War Cannon parked majestically next to the building and aimed up the river. The house was abandoned and standing open, so I went inside. I recall a nice desk with books and papers still on it. I remember finding a photograph of the construction crew standing in front of the unfinished castle. As I recall, most of the good furniture and Bannerman's possessions had been removed from the home; just some odds and ends were left. Most of my spare time was spent roaming the castle looking for hidden treasures. There was a rumor that somewhere in the building was a case of Civil War Colt pistols still stored in one of the rooms. I spent many hours wandering those rooms of Bannerman's searching for this treasure to no avail. This was but another rumor, never to be proven, about the mysterious castle.

As hard as it is to believe today, after a few weeks of living 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on Bannerman's Island, it was becoming akin to being trapped in a penal colony, with no escape. I hadn't had a hot bath in weeks, there was no place to go

for entertainment, there was no electricity except for the emergency generator and, to coin a phrase, I was getting "Castle Fever". Val needed me back at the store for a couple of days and I jumped at the chance to take his old Jeep station wagon, which was loaded with live Civil War cannon balls and projectiles, and drive the load back to New Jersey. It was dark by the time I began the trip back and I was in a hurry to get home; I was going about as fast as the Jeep could go around winding narrow roads, when all of a sudden, a large deer ran out in front of me. I had never seen a deer outside of a zoo, so seeing one in my headlights was something of a phenomenon. One thing about that Jeep station wagon; it had great brakes; that car could stop on a dime. I instinctively slammed on the brakes and the vehicle squealed to a stop. As this was happening, I heard the rumble of wooden crates filled with ancient live shells building up speed as they slid to the front. The crates crashed into the back of the passenger seat and drove it into the windshield. I was stopped in the middle of the road trying to get my breath. The deer was not harmed, the shells didn't explode, the windshield was not broken, the car was not wrecked and I had a few boxes of deadly new passengers beside me to accompany me on a kinder, gentler ride to Jersey.

After a few days rest, I was back at the island unloading shells and spending my spare time roaming the castle. On the ground floor I discovered thousands of triangular shaped bayonets that were made for the 45/70 Springfield rifles used up through the 1890's. These bayonets were in three stages of condition: the roughest had a light coating of rust on them. They could still be cleaned to good condition with a little work. The second group were dry with a very light coating of surface rust. These would clean to excellent condition with very little work. The last group were brand new, still in the original grease and in mint condition. Nearby were thousands of new, blued steel scabbards for these bayonets. The scabbards were stored separately from the bayonets as they had never been issued. For entertainment, we would take arm loads of bayonets outside and throw them at a tree. I was soon able to stand about 20 feet from the tree and stick a bayonet in it every time. "Familiarity breeds contempt".

As the summer wore on, we eventually finished our work; we had effectively removed all the dangerous projectiles and explosives from the castle. In the last few days of my stay, I had more time to explore the depths of Bannerman's Castle; there were many discoveries, some are now forgotten, some were recorded on film such as the case of brand new Sharpes rifle stocks found on the third floor, or the boxes of new, unfinished Krag rifle parts with each wooden crate inscribed with the stage of machining that was performed before manufacture was ceased. Memories include: walking out on a rotting crumbling beam to get to a half buried wooden crate containing ancient rusty large sword-like bayonets for some long forgotten old rifle. Bags of flints for flintlock rifles and pistols, probably 150 years old.

There was an old barrel on the ground floor covered with a burlap bag; inside were dozens of flat, wheel like devices each about 2 feet in diameter. These turned out to be rotors from Aceles Feed Systems, used to feed ammo into Gatling Guns. The outer casings of these Aceles doughnut shaped Gatling magazines were long gone having been scrapped for the brass during World War II. There was the unforgettable sight of thousands of colorful packs of Civil War cannon ball fuses still in the original cases. The packets were marked with the date and the arsenal, Frankfort, where they were made; each color designated a different burn time. These fuses were stored in a dry area and would still function just as they did in the 1860's.

During that summer, at the tender age of 22, I had no real concept of the historical significance of the island, the castle, and the thousands of military artifacts scattered over the property. I took a shovel once out to the breakwater, plunged it into the dirt and rock and came up with a cap and ball revolver so rusty I couldn't identify the make. This whole area had been reinforced with guns, parts, bed frames, and other junk. Apparently at the turn of the century, obsolete firearms were cheaper to use than steel bars for strengthening the sides of the basin area. At low tide in the docking area of the basin, you could see the barrels of Springfield rifles sticking up out of the water. These guns, now quite valuable, were used for nothing more than reinforcement of the stone and cement boundaries of the basin.

I have, in my youth, done some stupid things; never with malice, only out of naiveté. I suppose, as most kids, I fell victim to that basic philosophy of the young: "I am invincible, nothing bad could ever happen to me". My adventures as outlined here could not be complete without telling the story of probably the most dangerous and idiotic event of my days at Banana's Island. I had over the weeks come to know the caretaker and the superintendent of the island well. Turns out the "Super" played bass fiddle in a little band that performed on a flat bed truck set up on a street in Nyack, across the river from the island. I was invited to come over and watch the show on a Saturday night. I was given a brief checkout of the tiny outboard motor boat we used to run back and forth from the island to the shore. Back in those days boats were not required to have life jackets or lights, so there were none. After a five minute instruction on how to start the motor and how to steer the boat, I was left to fend for myself. When I left for Nyack, it was still daylight, and although I didn't have a life jacket or a light, and even though I couldn't swim, I felt comfortable in the boat, I had been in it many times and felt I could handle it. I made it from the island to Nyack with no problems, the boat and motor worked well and I was able to safely navigate the Hudson River to the shore line and dock up. I stayed for a couple of hours watching and enjoying the show. It became dark, it became late, and it was time to go home. I made my way back to the boat landing and realized it was pitch dark on the river. I was a bit skittish about this, but I ~~through~~ thought with a little luck I could find the island even in the dark.



I climbed in the boat, started the motor, and aimed the craft in the general direction of the castle. I was going very slow to avoid ramming into the breakwater which rose just inches above the water line. After "putting" along in the little boat for what seemed like forever, I began to sense a large formation in front of me. Even in pitch dark the walls of Bannerman's Castle could be perceived. I couldn't exactly see it but I knew it was there. I worked the boat slowly and carefully around to the front of the building and inched it through the bridge like structure that was the entrance to the basin. Centering the boat as it passed between the stone towers gave me my bearings and I aimed the boat in the general area of the dock. I was somehow able to gently ram the pier and climb out still not seeing anything but vague dark images of the castle and the surrounding area. I was relieved to be home, but it was years before I fully realized what a foolish thing I had done.

The Bannerman adventure came to an end late in the summer of 1958; I went back to my home in North Carolina to go to college. I visited the island only once more the following summer. Val took a friend of mine and I back to the castle. There was little change and we used the same little boat to get to the island from the shore. We shot some 16mm film, but it was black and white and the quality was poor. I never returned; as I matured and grew wiser from age, I came to realize I had experienced an adventure that could only occur once in a lifetime; it was the type of event that was a product of luck, being in the right place at the right time, being in the company of a dynamic, young entrepreneur who seized a remarkable opportunity before it could pass him by. I was privileged to have been a small part of this moment in time, to have been in the company of bright, interesting successful adventurers, who were my guides, my mentors, and who allowed me to share their Summer of 58.

END

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