



The M1 carbine was the most produced U.S. military small arm of World War II. The name of jukebox maker Rock-Ola on their carbines was undoubtably a surprise to many G.I.s.

"MAKING A DIFFERENT KIND OF MUSIC"



The Rock-Ola M1 Carbine

Before World War II, the Rock-Ola Mfg. Corp. in Chicago was best known for its jukeboxes. After America entered the war, Rock-Ola became part of the "Arsenal of Democracy," making U.S. M1 carbines. Accounting for less than 4 percent of the total, Rock-Olas are some of the rarest carbines, which makes them highly desired by collectors.

By BRUCE N. CANFIELD, Field Editor

In 1941, as it had in 1917, the United States found itself embroiled in a world war for which it was woefully unprepared. Our armed forces lacked all manner of arms and other implements of war and were in the unenviable position of having to play "catch up" with the other belligerent nations who had already been at war for several years. In a surprisingly brief period of time, however, the vast industrial might of America began to "get in gear," and staggering quantities of war materiel, ranging from canned rations to aircraft carriers, began flowing from our factories.

By the time of "V-J" Day in August 1945, the United States possessed the strongest and best equipped fighting force in the history of mankind. The contributions of American industry in defeating the forces of tyranny cannot be overstated.

Many firms that, prior to December 7, 1941, had never produced war materiel were soon turning out vast numbers of arms and other implements of warfare. One of the best examples of how U.S. civilian firms adapted to the production of military equipment is the M1 carbine. Adopted in late 1941, the "U.S. Carbine, Caliber .30, M1," was made in greater numbers than any other U.S. military small arm during, or prior to, World War II.

The M1 carbine was primarily intended to be a replacement for the .45 pistol in the hands of officers and other military personnel whose primary duties often precluded the carrying of the standard service rifle. Designed by the Winchester Repeating Arms Co. and adopted after an exhaustive series of trials and tests, the carbine was a lightweight (about 5½ lbs.)

semi-automatic shoulder arm that fired a .30-cal. cartridge ballistically comparable to a .357 Mag. handgun cartridge. While significantly less powerful than the M1 Garand rifle, which fired the .30-'06 Sprg. cartridge, the carbine was more effective than the .45 pistol at all but point-blank range. Almost immediately upon its adoption, the carbine proved to be popular with the majority of users and much greater numbers were manufactured and issued than originally anticipated.

In order to accomplish the seemingly insurmountable task of producing millions of carbines in a relatively brief period of time, the U.S. Army Ordnance Department sought a number of prime contractors from the civilian sector. As was the case during World War I, America's industrial might and managerial acumen rose to the occasion. Eventually, 10 prime contractors were selected for carbine production.

Surprisingly, the only prime contractor that had manufactured firearms prior to World War II was Winchester. The other various makers were an eclectic mix of entities whose pre-war products included postal meters, automotive components, typewriters and other office machines. One of the more interesting firms to manufacture M1 carbines during World War II is the focus of this article, the Rock-Ola Mfg. Co.

The Rock-Ola Scale Co. was founded in 1927 by David C. Rockola. As the years passed, the small Chicago firm grew and began producing other products. In 1932 the name was changed to Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. Mr. Rockola indicated that he added the hyphen as people were prone to mispronounce

the name. By the 1930s, Rock-Ola was manufacturing a wide array of products including scales, parking meters, pinball machines and furniture. However, in the eyes of the public, the firm became most closely associated with coin-operated jukeboxes. Large numbers of Rock-Ola jukeboxes were in use from the mid-1930s into the 1950s and well beyond.

When the United States entered World War II, vast amounts of war materiel were needed and virtually all manufacturing entities were contacted regarding potential military production contracts. Rock-Ola was no exception, and the company was approached in very early 1942 regarding the possibility of becoming involved in the M1 carbine production program. Initially, Rock-Ola was going to produce only carbine barrels, but the U.S. Army Ordnance Department requested that the company manufacture complete carbines. After receiving the necessary drawings and other production information, the Rock-Ola Company stated that it could manufacture them at a maximum per-unit price of \$58. To this end, a contract was granted on March 21, 1942, to Rock-Ola for 100,000 M1 carbines. The company also received contracts to supply barrels to other prime contractors, mainly its Chicago neighbor Quality Hardware Machine Corp.

As was the case with most of the other prime contractors, Rock-Ola experienced a great deal of difficulty obtaining the production tooling and qualified machinists necessary for firearm manufacture. In order to boost production and cut costs, Rock-Ola, like the other prime contractors, utilized a large network of subcontractors to produce many of the parts required. Since the company was well versed in fabricating wooden cabinets for its jukeboxes and other products, Rock-Ola made its own carbine stocks and handguards. The company also

manufactured stocks and handguards for other carbine prime contractors, again primarily Quality Hardware.

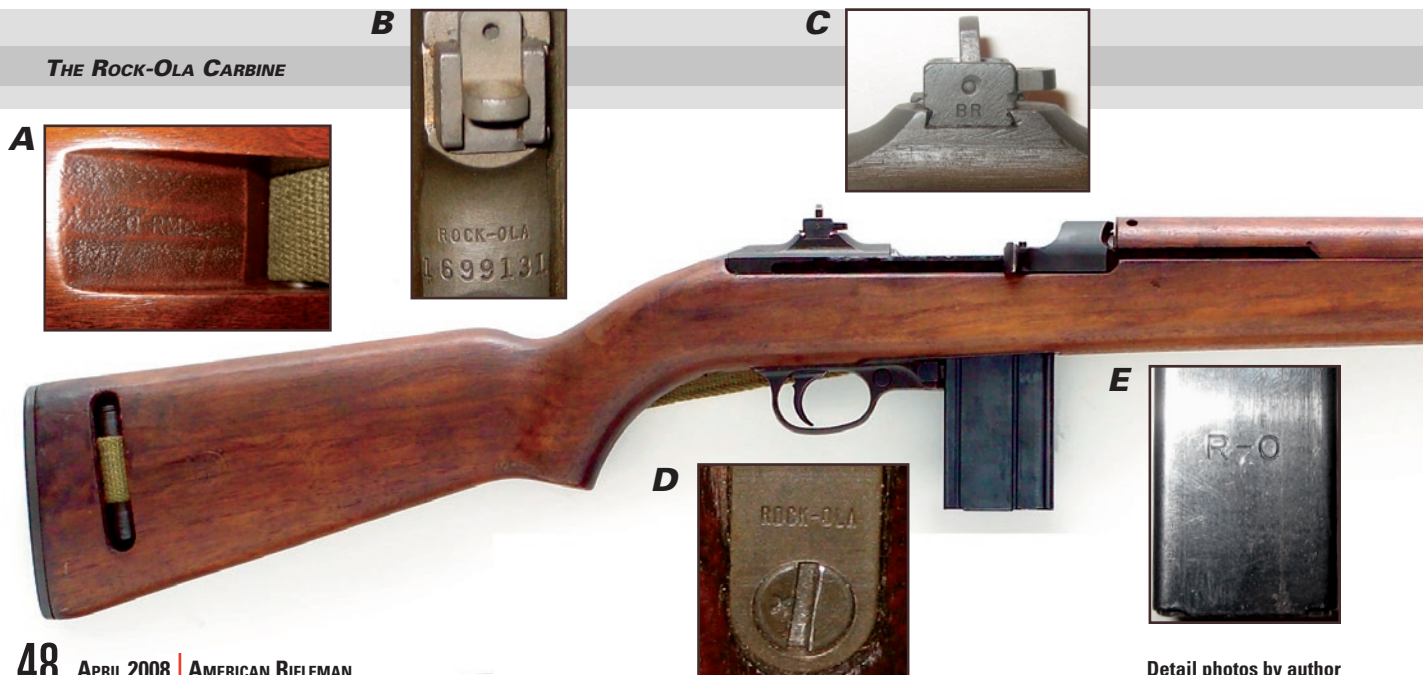
Despite many problems, delays and setbacks, Rock-Ola was eventually able to get into production. The firm's initial batch of barrels was finished in December 1942, and the first completed carbines were delivered in February 1943. Even before the company delivered its first carbine, it was awarded supplemental contracts for an additional 152,746 carbines with a daily production goal of 1,500.

The number of components manufactured by each of the original prime contractors varied from firm to firm. For example, Winchester Repeating Arms Co. and Saginaw Steering Gear Division of General Motors each made 15 parts, more than any of the other manufacturers. Quality Hardware Machine Corp., on the other hand, only made one part (the receiver) and acquired all other parts from various subcontractors, including stocks and handguards, as well as some barrels, from Rock-Ola.

Rock-Ola manufactured the following parts for its own M1 carbines: receiver, barrel, stock, handguard, gas cylinder, bolt, trigger, sear, recoil plate, firing pin, trigger housing, extractor and operating slide.

Each prime contractor was assigned a letter code that was stamped on many components along with a subcontractor code letter. Rock-Ola's code letter was "R." Thus, for example, a rear sight base manufactured for Rock-Ola by the Jasper Blackburn Co. (St. Louis, Mo.) would be stamped "BR" and a magazine produced for the firm by Owens Illinois Can Co. (Chicago, Ill.) was stamped "RO." As can be seen, sometimes the prime contractor's code letter was first and sometimes it was second. Rock-Ola manufactured its own recoil plates, and these components were stamped with the complete name ("Rock-Ola") rather than just initials.

THE ROCK-OLA CARBINE



Detail photos by author

Rock-Ola barrels were also stamped with the name of the company and, initially, the date of manufacture, but the date was eliminated later in production.

The carbine stocks made by Rock-Ola were stamped “RMC” (Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp.) in the sling recess. The stocks made by Rock-Ola for Quality Hardware Machine Corp. were marked “Q-RMC” in the same location (Quality Hardware’s code letter was “Q”).

ROCK-OLA WAS ASSIGNED THE FOLLOWING SERIAL NUMBER BLOCKS FOR ITS CARBINE PRODUCTION PROGRAM:

1,662,250 – 1,762,519
4,532,100 – 4,632,099
6,071,189 – 6,099,688
6,199,684 – 6,219,688

While Rock-Ola never came close to meeting its directed goal of 1,500 carbines per day, the company did deliver a total of 228,500, along with a sizeable number of extra barrel assemblies by the time the firm’s contracts were cancelled and production ceased on May 31, 1944. Rock-Ola’s output represented about 3.7 percent of the total carbine production, the lowest percentage of all prime contractors, except for the ill-fated Irwin-Pedersen which made fewer than 4,000 complete carbines, none of which were initially accepted by the government.

In addition to the carbines produced under government contract, Rock-Ola fabricated a small number (estimated at around 60) “presentation” carbines as gifts to company executives and other officials. The first two-dozen or so were not serially numbered, while some of the remaining examples had an “EX” prefix to the serial number. The presentation carbines were typically finished in a bright blue rather than the dull Parkerizing of the military-issue carbines, and most were accompanied by a custom-made wooden case with the name of the



Courtesy of Robert Bruce Military Photography

Compared with the Inland Division of General Motors—which accounted for 43 percent of M1 carbine production (above)—Rock-Ola’s 3.7 percent of production was the smallest of firms that delivered complete guns.

recipient engraved on a brass plaque on the lid. The few extant examples are highly prized collectibles today.

As was the case with virtually all M1 carbines, the vast majority of Rock-Ola carbines were subsequently rebuilt by the government following World War II. When a carbine was rebuilt, most of the parts were stripped from it and any worn, broken or superseded components were replaced with updated parts. Parts were replaced with no regard as to the original maker, thus rebuilt carbines were assembled with mixed parts. Updated components typically installed on rebuilt carbines included an adjustable rear sight, rotary safety and barrel band with integral bayonet lug. The carbines were re-Parkerized as necessary.

Undoubtedly, many of the young G.I.s who were issued Rock-Ola carbines were slightly amused at seeing the name of a jukebox maker on their guns. While not rare, Rock-Ola carbines can sometimes be difficult to turn up and, for today’s collectors, these carbines are among the most desirable and valuable due to the low production numbers and the uniqueness of the maker. The “jukebox carbine” is certain to remain one of the most sought-after examples of the U.S. M1 carbine. While the sounds that emanated from a Rock-Ola jukebox in a roadside diner were certainly different from those of a Rock-Ola carbine in a foxhole in France, the latter was still welcome “music” to many G.I.s in its own right.



Rock-Ola M1 carbine stocks are marked “RMC” while those made by Rock-Ola for Quality Hardware are marked “Q-RMC” in the sling recess (A). Receivers are marked “ROCK-OLA” above the serial number (B). The “BR” on rear sights signifies units made by Jasper Blackburn Co. for Rock-Ola (C). “ROCK-OLA” can also be found on the recoil plate (D). The “R-O” on the magazine stands for Rock-Ola and the Owens Illinois Can Co. (E). Earlier barrel markings include the name “ROCK-OLA” with the company’s symbol (F).