

Its name and familiar Owl Head symbols have appeared on a bewildering array of guns and other products for over a century, but the 1980s will mark...

A FRESH START For IVER JOHNSON

BY PETE DICKEY

ANYONE who sets out to write the definitive history of Iver Johnson and his products will find tough going. He would not only have to document a huge number of pistols, derringers, revolvers, rifles and shotguns, but blank, air, line-throwing and toy guns as well. That would be the beginning. Then he would have to list leg irons, handcuffs, hand tools, bicycles, tricycles, "juniorcycles," motorcycles and baby walkers.

Even if the Iver Johnson historian stuck to firearms and let the rest go, he would run into trouble because, in the early days, private branding for the various jobbers, distributors, agents and other middle-men invites confusion.

Iver Johnson surely made "Secret Service Special" revolvers for the Chicago firm of Fred Biffar—but so did Meriden Firearms Co.; I.J. made many variations of so-marked "Bull Dog" revolvers—but so did Forehand & Wadsworth and others, and they all looked about the same; I.J. used a number of grip-plate logos (in addition to many variations of its famous owl head) that some historians say were exclu-

sively I.J.'s designs; yet other historians and old catalogs show some of these logos on revolvers which are identified as being made by other manufacturers.

Did Iver Johnson sell its grip plates to, or buy them from, rivals? Are the chroniclers wrong? Were the catalog compilers of yesteryear less than careful about using the correct illustrations?

These are only a few of the questions which will face I.J.'s official historian who will be more than hampered by I.J.'s lack of early records.

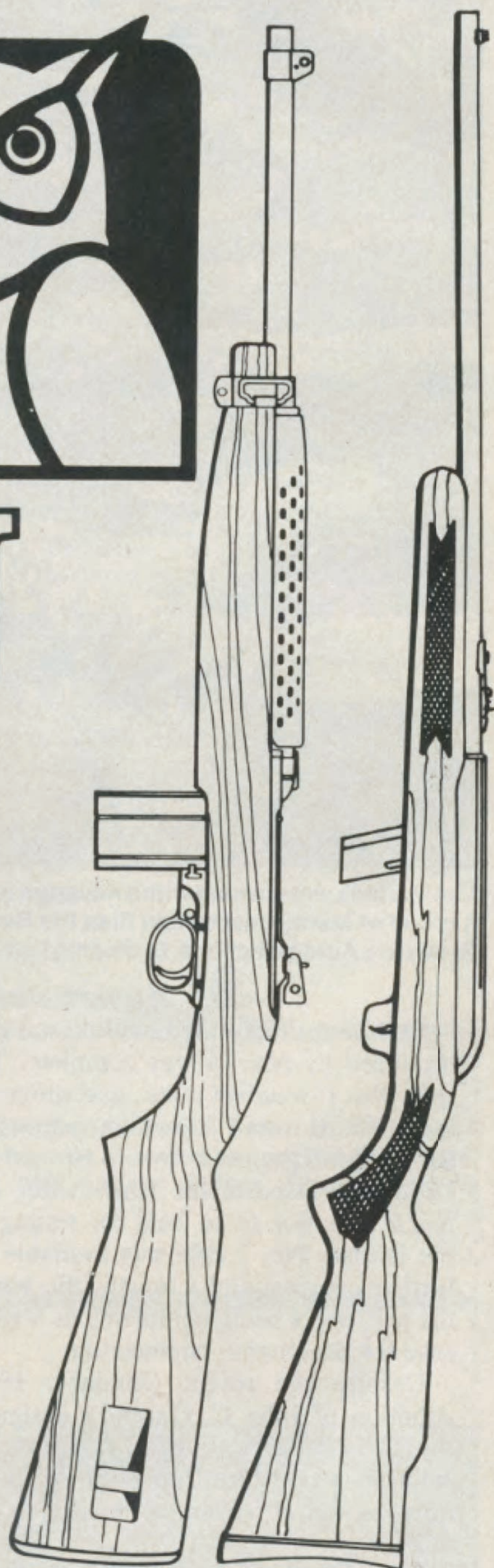
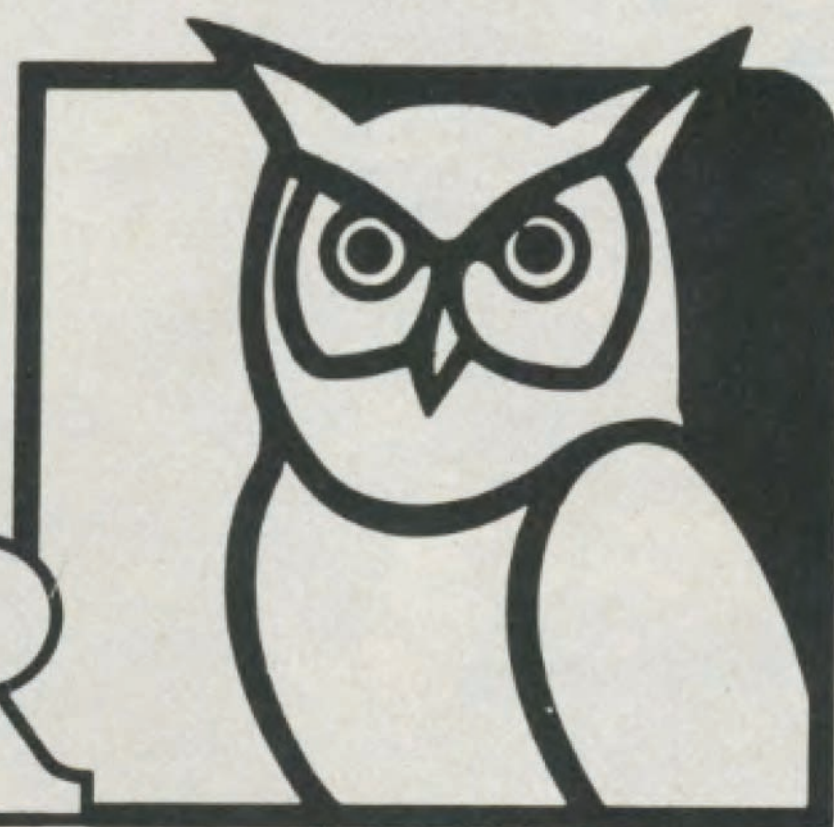
The purpose here, however, is not to dwell on Iver Johnson's considerable and complex history, but to look at its present. Nonetheless, a capsule history of the firm is given herewith as an introduction:

1871—Iver Johnson and Martin Bye, immigrant gunsmiths, formed the partnership of Johnson, Bye & Co. in Worcester, Mass.

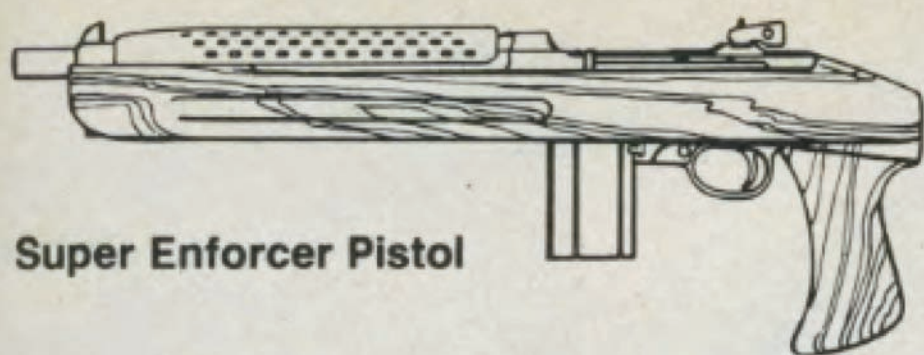
1883—Bye left partnership. Firm reorganized as Iver Johnson & Co.

1891—Firm became Iver Johnson's Arms & Cycle Works and moved to Fitchburg, Mass., where Johnson died in 1895.

1973—Firm passed from hands of Johnson



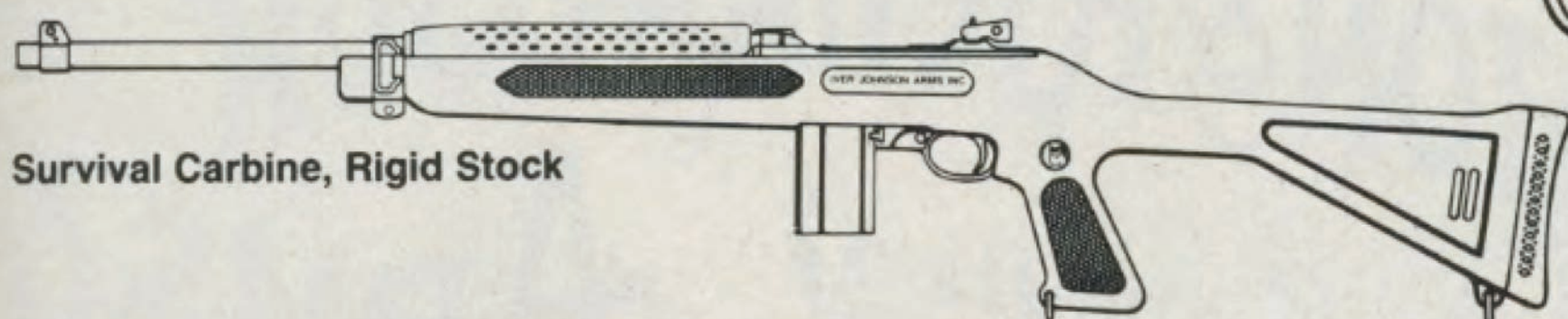
One of I.J.'s mainstays is its M1 Carbine. Imports, however, such as the Canadian-made Trailblazer, increase the product line.



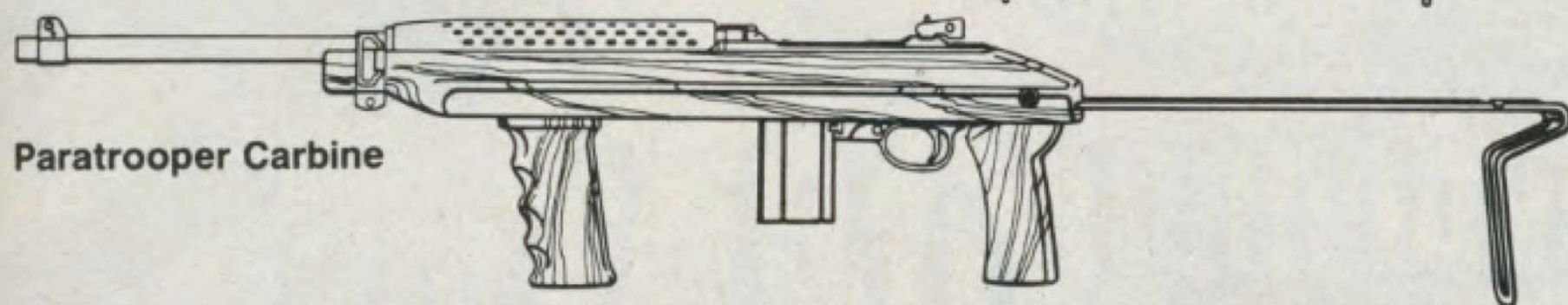
Super Enforcer Pistol



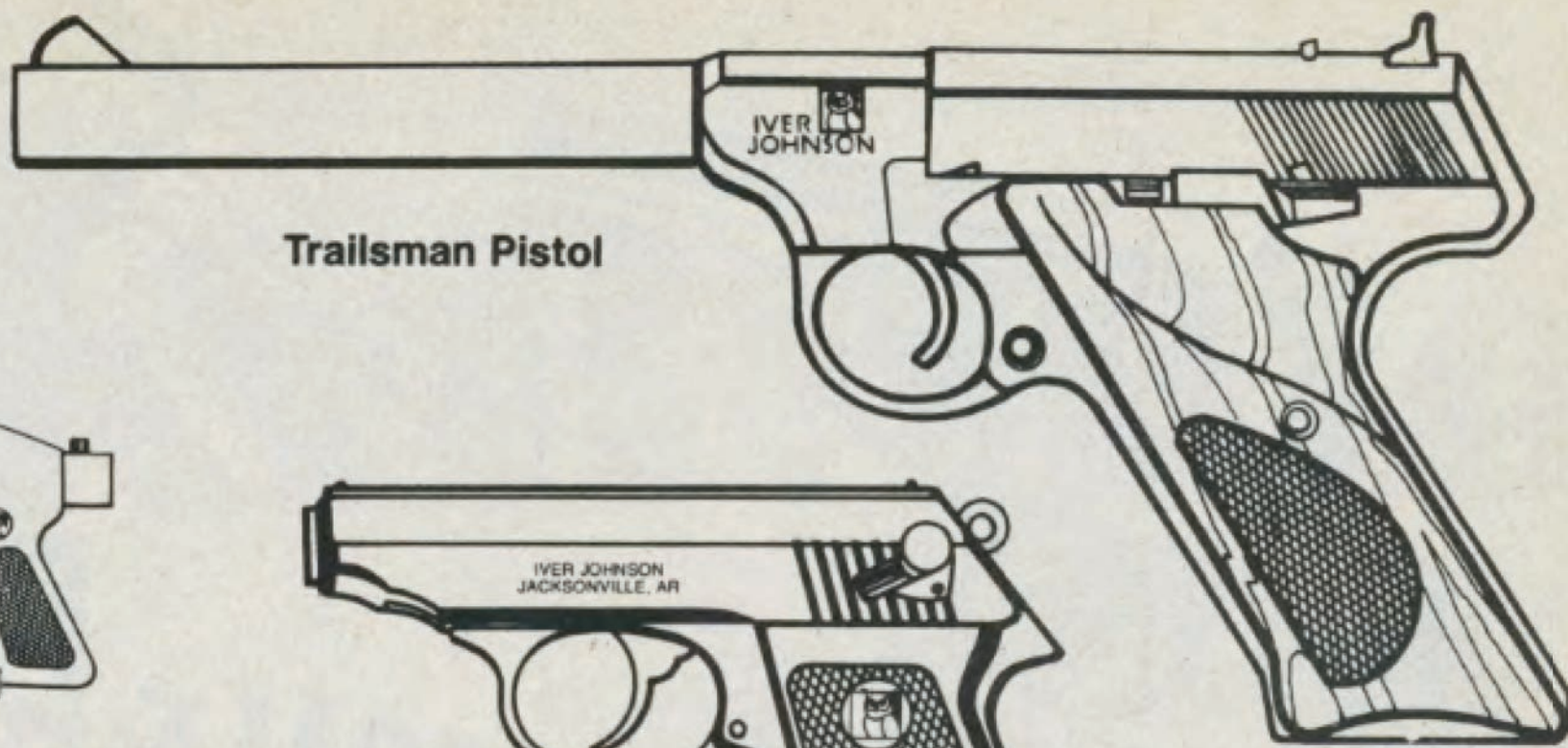
Survival Carbine, Folding Stock



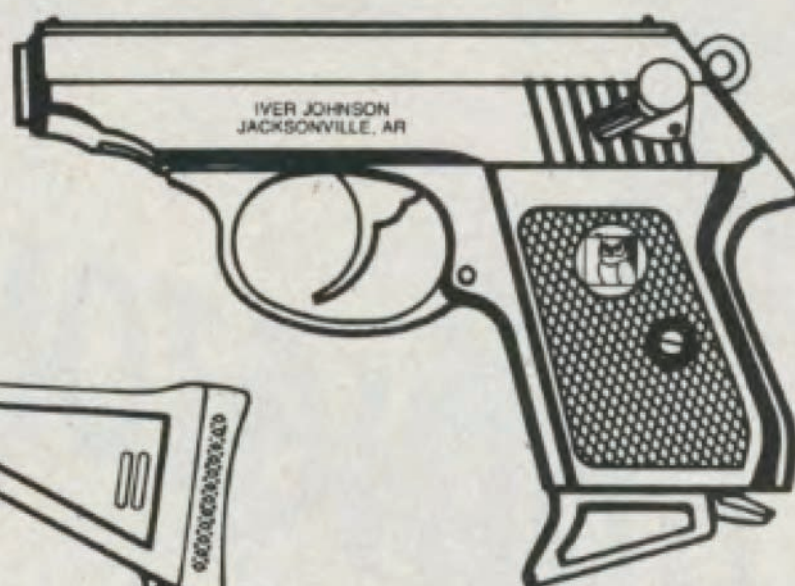
Survival Carbine, Rigid Stock



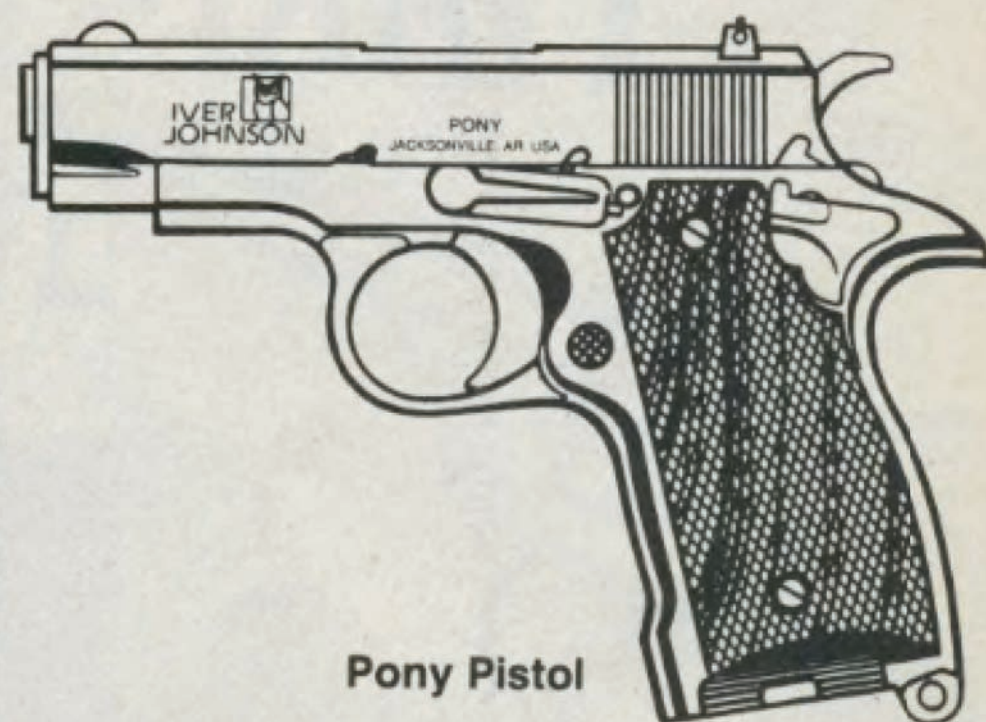
Paratrooper Carbine



Trailsman Pistol



Double-Action Pistol



Pony Pistol



Lew Sharp, director of marketing (l.), Glen Barber, president (standing) and Mickey McSpadden, director of finance, are shown in front of a drawing of the old Fitchburg plant. The Arkansas facility is shown at the right.



family to those of Louis Imperato, president of John Jovino, a giant New York firearms distributor.

1975—Firm became Iver Johnson's Arms, Inc. Acquired Plainfield Machine Co. of Middlesex, N.J., makers of M1 carbines.

1977—Firm moved to Middlesex, N.J.

1982—Imperato sold firm to current owners.

1983—Firm moved to Jacksonville, Ark. Acquired Universal Firearms Co. of Hialeah, Fla., makers of M1 carbines.

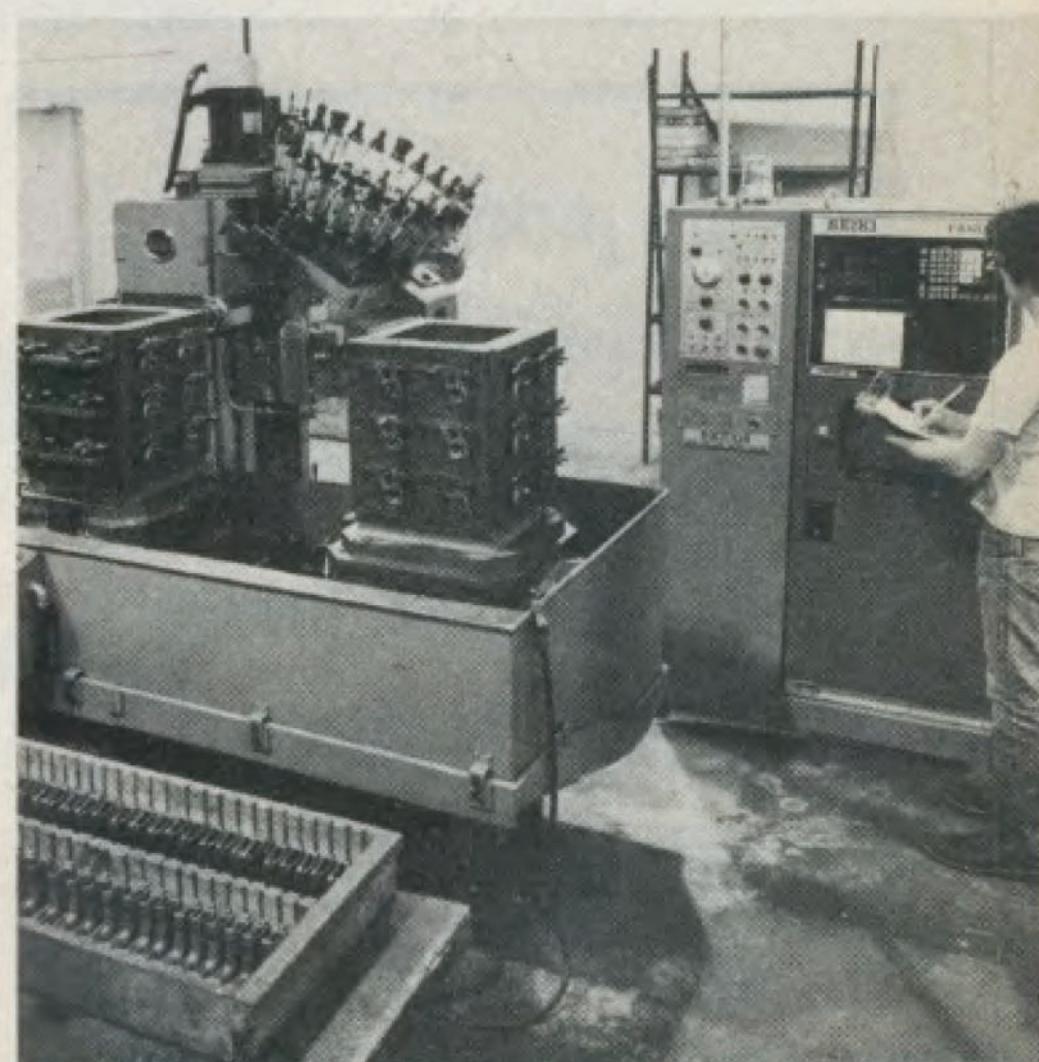
That brings us, rather abruptly, up to date.

The new Iver Johnson Arms, Inc., facility is owned and managed by a group of experienced gun fanciers and merchandisers from Arkansas. In their home state, they found the space, labor force and working conditions that would permit im-

proved manufacture of current products and room for expansion.

The new Iver Johnson Arms, Inc., facility seems, to the visitor, to be the perfect arms factory site. The level 27-acre plot is located in a still uncrowded industrial area a dozen miles from Little Rock. A huge main building stretches out with one end for receiving and the other for completed inventory and shipping. The front, central section is a handsomely appointed office, sales and reception area with access to the manufacturing hall behind it. There is no clutter, no cramping, no question of having to make do. The manufacturing hall, office space, the adjacent parts and raw material building, and the huge, indoor range are, all 83,000 sq. ft. of them, clearly designed for arms manufacture. This is not surpris-

continued on p. 74



Modern, multiple-spindle machine turns out increasing numbers of steel frames for I.J.'s Pony .380 self-loading pistol.

ing, since they originally formed the Jacksonville Ordnance Plant built in World War II.

Despite the short time the new plant has been open, the many I.J.-made products are actually being made, not just rumored, as in the past. As in most plants, the services of sub-suppliers are utilized for some parts procurement, but the large number of additional machines now being installed shows that I.J.'s Production Manager, Tommy Lee, will be depending less on sub-suppliers in the future.

At the moment, the I.J. M1 carbines (formerly made by Plainfield) are being turned out in many variations for U.S. and export sales. Since I.J. also owns Universal Firearms in Florida, which also produces variations of the M1, this World War II-era product is an important I.J. asset. Not only are the completed guns sold here and abroad, but there is a considerable export business in parts to those Asiatic and South American countries that still issue the carbine for military and police use. Logically, though the Florida plant has a separate sales structure, there is some intershipment of common parts between the two facilities.

I.J.'s export catalogs, printed in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, stress the .30-cal., 18"-barreled carbines in the following configurations:

Military styles with walnut or birch stock.

Paratrooper styles with telescoping metal butt and wooden fore-stock with vertical hand grip.

Survival styles with rigid or folding plastic stock.

The carbines can be had in either blued or stainless steel versions (see *American Rifleman*, July, 1981, p. 67) and in the 5.7 mm Spitfire chambering as well.

The Spitfire, originally designed by Col. Melvin Johnson as a low-cost, high-velocity military round, is basically a necked-down .30 carbine case using a 40-gr .224" bullet and delivering around 3000 f.p.s. of muzzle velocity. It is a handloading proposition at present, with case forming and reloading dies being supplied by RCBS. I.J. is attempting to obtain a source for factory-formed cases and/or cartridges, but has not, as yet, been successful.

For the police and military market, I.J. can provide fully automatic versions of its carbines on order, and it also produces, on a regular basis, the 9"-barreled Super Enforcer pistol. Considering the possible combinations of stocks, semi-auto or full-auto options, steel types and calibers, then, I.J. carbines can justify a sizable catalog for themselves—but I.J.'s current domestic catalog contains far more.

Completing its rifle line is a .22 LR

autoloader which is familiar to Canadians as the Cooley. It is a detachable-box-magazine model with a one-piece, checkered, Monte Carlo hardwood stock and is imported by I.J. under the Trailblazer model name.

Pistols, including of course, the Super Enforcer mentioned above, account for the balance of I.J.'s product line at the moment. Shotguns are no longer made by the firm that sold countless Champion single-shots in years past.

The pistols are limited to the semi-auto variety for, like the Champion shotguns, the "Owl Head" revolvers, which were once sold in the millions, are no longer offered.

The first I.J. semi-auto to be offered was the Pony .380 which, unfortunately, was offered long before deliveries began. Now the Pony is being produced daily in increasing quantities. The new plant and automated machinery have made this possible.

The Pony has an interesting history as it was once advertised—but not sold—by Colt. In the 1970s, many thousands were made by Garcia Corp.'s firearms manufacturing arm, F.I. Industries (formerly Firearms International Corp.) in Maryland under the name F.I. Model D. Iver Johnson acquired the Garcia/F.I. parts, tooling and jigs around 1978 and announced the return to production, but only a few were made with the I.J. marking—until the Jacksonville move cured the problems.

The Pony is a compact steel-framed pocket pistol with laterally adjustable rear sight and a locked breech. Its immediate ancestor (and that of Colt's larger Government Model .380—see *American Rifleman* for December, 1983, p. 52) was the Star DK which was imported in quantity under the name Starfire up until 1969, but, since then, has been held to be unimportable because of its small size.

Next in the chronology of I.J. self-loaders is the .22 LR or .25 ACP Double Action. Most of the parts are currently imported, but the frame is U.S.-made and the pistols are assembled, finished and testfired in Arkansas. A full report on this 5½" long plinker/defense pistol appeared in the Dope Bag of September, 1983.

Finally, Iver Johnson has announced a "new" and, to many, its most interesting pistol which it calls the Trailsman. Lew Sharp, I.J.'s director of marketing and formerly a crack Colt salesman (and a crack shot as well) must have been tempted to call this model the I.J. Woodsman because that's what it appears to be. In particular, it is almost a dead ringer for the Colt Woodsman of the immediate post-World War II era. This Colt had the elongated grip form and the M1911-type magazine release (which was later changed back to the prewar position on the bottom of the grip).

All production of the Colt Woodsman

ended in 1976, and I.J. hopes to be able to fill the nostalgic and utilitarian void it left.

Judging from a single prototype examined, the all-steel I.J. Trailsman seems to have quite a future. It is made in Argentina on basic tooling purchased from Talares Livinias (TALA) which once exported similar pistols to the U.S. under the Gaucho trade name, but I.J. is incorporating at least one idea of its own. The original Argentine barrel is "good," says competition shooter Sharp, "but not good enough for us." When the pistols go on the U.S. market next month, they will be fitted with barrels made by Lothar Walther in Germany.

At the moment, drift-adjustable sighted models with sporting weight 4½" or 6" barrels are en route, but other variations might be available in the future.

Regardless of what products I.J. makes or markets in the future, says Sharp, we may be sure that the Owl Head will be graphically evident. A century old emblem of product recognition is another of I.J.'s most valuable assets. I.J.'s new management won't let us forget it. ■