

Butch, "Cholly" and Marie Steen reminisce over old copies of SHOTGUN NEWS. Even by the middle 1960s, Sarco was running multiple pages of SGN ads.



A HALF-CENTURY OF JUNK: **SARCO TURNS 50**

A story that began a half-century ago in a New Jersey attic has a lot of twists and turns, but one theme throughout. One man's trash is another's treasure. **By Robert W. Hunnicutt**

Some things are just made to go together: peaches 'n cream, Abbott and Costello, Sarco and SHOTGUN NEWS. It's impossible to imagine SGN without Sarco, and it's hard to see how Sarco ever could have existed without SGN.

The late John Enright, an Australian who wrote for SGN when we first added stories, got his first sample copy and asked "Who's this Sarco? That place is an Aladdin's Cave!"

That's a great way of putting it. Sarco's the kind of place you find things you didn't even know existed, much less know you needed right away! The ads, more than 300

pages' worth a year, conjure a vast, dark place with surprises around every corner.

In this case, the advertising very accurately reflects reality, because that's how Sarco is; except there are several vast, dark places full of fascinating goodies. There are gloomy passageways, musky smells and strange objects stored at odd angles. Aladdin's cave? That's it, all right.

The Aladdin of this particular cave is Charles "Cholly" Steen, and for more than a half-century he's pursued the "good deals" of the firearms world. A good deal for Steen can mean anything from an out-of-print book to a demilled MiG-21 cockpit. If the deal's good enough, he'll

figure out a way to sell the product, maybe not now, but someday.

The Steen story is one of those motivational tales you might hear at a Zig Ziglar pep rally: do what you really love and the rest will follow. Steen was a gun-crazy teenager who longed to design his own firearms. After service in the U.S. Marine Corps, he wed wife Marie, a schoolteacher, and pursued a degree in engineering.

But his studies kept taking a back seat to wheeling and dealing at gun shows, originally to fill out his own collection, but more and more to supplement Marie's teaching income. They'd travel all night to come home from a

SARCO, Inc.

1984 CATALOGUE - 100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEE - NEW JERSEY

9MM LUGER PISTOLS

CALIBER 9MM LUGER

PLEASE INCLUDE POSTAGE ON ALL ORDERS EXCEPT AMMUNITION. PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE W/O NOTICE.

NON-CORROSIVE DOXER (American Type) PRIMERS FULLY RELOADABLE 9MM LUGER AMMO.

CANADIAN MANUFACTURE BEAUTIFUL BRIGHT CLEAN AMMUNITION

\$4.00 per 100
\$35.00 per 1000
\$110.00 per case (30/100)

DEALER INQUIRES OR LARGER QUANTITIES BETTER!

AMMUNITION

ISSUE RIFLE

30-06	100	100.00
30-06	200	200.00
30-06	300	300.00
30-06	400	400.00
30-06	500	500.00
30-06	600	600.00
30-06	700	700.00
30-06	800	800.00
30-06	900	900.00
30-06	1000	1000.00
30-06	1100	1100.00
30-06	1200	1200.00
30-06	1300	1300.00
30-06	1400	1400.00
30-06	1500	1500.00
30-06	1600	1600.00
30-06	1700	1700.00
30-06	1800	1800.00
30-06	1900	1900.00
30-06	2000	2000.00
30-06	2100	2100.00
30-06	2200	2200.00
30-06	2300	2300.00
30-06	2400	2400.00
30-06	2500	2500.00
30-06	2600	2600.00
30-06	2700	2700.00
30-06	2800	2800.00
30-06	2900	2900.00
30-06	3000	3000.00
30-06	3100	3100.00
30-06	3200	3200.00
30-06	3300	3300.00
30-06	3400	3400.00
30-06	3500	3500.00
30-06	3600	3600.00
30-06	3700	3700.00
30-06	3800	3800.00
30-06	3900	3900.00
30-06	4000	4000.00
30-06	4100	4100.00
30-06	4200	4200.00
30-06	4300	4300.00
30-06	4400	4400.00
30-06	4500	4500.00
30-06	4600	4600.00
30-06	4700	4700.00
30-06	4800	4800.00
30-06	4900	4900.00
30-06	5000	5000.00
30-06	5100	5100.00
30-06	5200	5200.00
30-06	5300	5300.00
30-06	5400	5400.00
30-06	5500	5500.00
30-06	5600	5600.00
30-06	5700	5700.00
30-06	5800	5800.00
30-06	5900	5900.00
30-06	6000	6000.00
30-06	6100	6100.00
30-06	6200	6200.00
30-06	6300	6300.00
30-06	6400	6400.00
30-06	6500	6500.00
30-06	6600	6600.00
30-06	6700	6700.00
30-06	6800	6800.00
30-06	6900	6900.00
30-06	7000	7000.00
30-06	7100	7100.00
30-06	7200	7200.00
30-06	7300	7300.00
30-06	7400	7400.00
30-06	7500	7500.00
30-06	7600	7600.00
30-06	7700	7700.00
30-06	7800	7800.00
30-06	7900	7900.00
30-06	8000	8000.00
30-06	8100	8100.00
30-06	8200	8200.00
30-06	8300	8300.00
30-06	8400	8400.00
30-06	8500	8500.00
30-06	8600	8600.00
30-06	8700	8700.00
30-06	8800	8800.00
30-06	8900	8900.00
30-06	9000	9000.00
30-06	9100	9100.00
30-06	9200	9200.00
30-06	9300	9300.00
30-06	9400	9400.00
30-06	9500	9500.00
30-06	9600	9600.00
30-06	9700	9700.00
30-06	9800	9800.00
30-06	9900	9900.00
30-06	10000	10000.00

30-06 CAL BAR BARRELS \$17.95

.50 BMG BARRELS \$39.95

EXCELLENT OR BETTER GUN.

ENFIELD #4 MK II SNIPER RIFLES Only \$24.95

A fine collection of rifles and shotguns that are in every day shop use. Stock up now for the coming season.

FANTASTIC LUMBER SALE

A fine collection of rifles and shotguns that are in every day shop use. Stock up now for the coming season.

SALE \$18.00 DOZ.

UNIVERSAL FRONT RAMP SIGHTS

COMPENSATORS

ASTRA M 400

SPRINGFIELD COLLECTORS

NO. 1 MK II RIFLES CAL. 303 ONLY \$24.95

100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEE!

ONLY \$1.95 EA.

SALE

MODEL 1917 & 1914 ENFIELD ACTIONS

Only \$16.95 Ea.

SALE

Redfield #787 Receiver Sights

THE BARGAIN OF THE YEAR

\$4.95

\$50.00 Per Dozen

RIFLES & SHOTGUNS

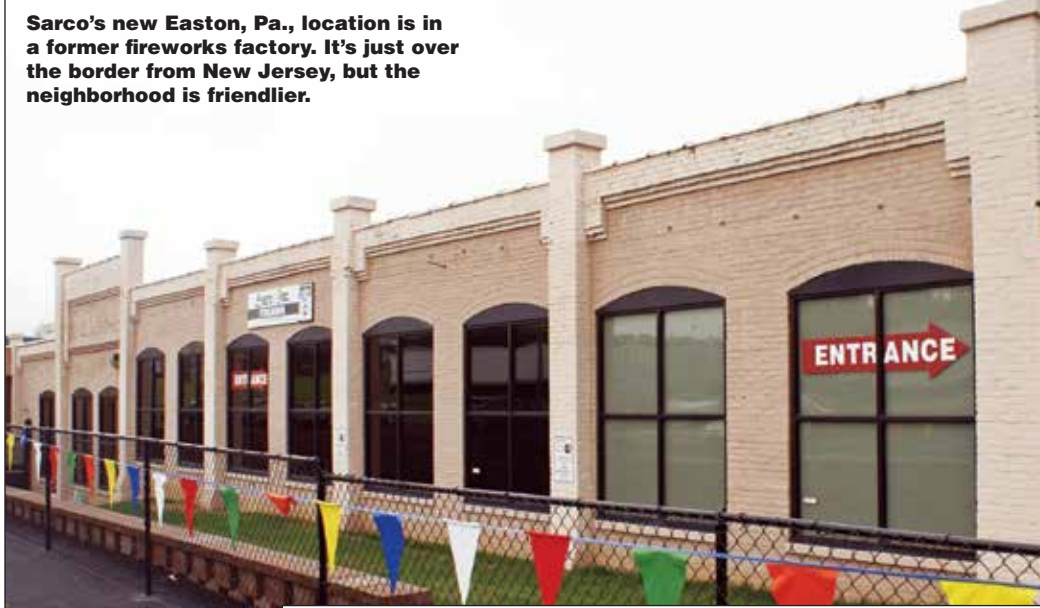
M1 GARAND Operating Rod \$3.95

Springfield M1 Col. 22 LR

HEAVY 30-06 BULL BARRELS

ONLY \$8.95

Sarco's new Easton, Pa., location is in a former fireworks factory. It's just over the border from New Jersey, but the neighborhood is friendlier.



An Enfield sniper rifle for \$24.95? 3840 rounds of 9mm for \$110? Flap holsters for 99¢? Those 1964 Sarco prices look mighty good these days.



Such a deal! Butch Steen hawks a .308 M1919 parts kit. There's some margin built into the price, but how long did they have to hold it?

weekend show and go straight to work Monday morning. Something had to give.

Steen suggested giving up on college and going into the gun business full time. Marie agreed, providing he could get his income up to \$60 a week by the end of the year. So the family took the plunge, starting Sarco, which stood for Steen Armament Research Co., out of the attic of their second-floor apartment in tiny Stirling, N.J.

From the beginning, it was a family business. Marie remembers sorting greasy parts on the kitchen table for hours, and ruining a sweater she forgot to take off before wire-wheeling rusty parts.

It quickly became apparent that going to gun shows, while profitable enough, was not the way to build a business. So in 1961, Steen first placed an ad in SHOTGUN NEWS and went into the mail-order business. Soon the yard of the Stirling apartment was filled with crates of surplus military parts. The neighbors were griping.

So the Steens bought the house next door, which included a barn, enabling the first big expansion of the Sarco inventory. By 1964, Sarco was already running multi-page ads in SGN, with the distinctive Steen copywriting style that's still apparent in today's advertising.

Surplus is just so much rusty, greasy old junk without an interesting backstory, and that's what a Sarco ad gives you. It's a style that doesn't necessarily translate to publications other than SGN. Since I started my career at the *American Rifleman*, Steen likes to remind me that he once advertised 1,000 Kropatschek rifles in the flagship NRA title, then as now many times larger than SGN. He didn't sell a one.

Steen's next big step was to quit depending on established importers and to travel abroad on his own buying expeditions. South America was a particularly happy hunting ground, as south-of-the-border militaries cashed bolt-action rifles in favor of autoloaders. He found that buying up whole armories brings some pleas-

ant surprises, as there were often spare parts and curiosities like pressure guns included with the haul.

He was hardly alone in the deal-chasing. Fellow New Jersey importer Val Forgett of Navy Arms, Century Arms of St. Albans, Vt. and several West Coast importers threw elbows to latch onto the best surplus deals. It was a piratical, cutthroat business that rewarded product knowledge, cash on hand and fast decision-making.

In 1984, Sarco moved into what would be its primary location for most of the next three decades, 323 Union St. in Stirling. Steen thought its 20,000 sq. ft. would be all he would ever need, but it filled up quickly during the sur-



Where some of the margin goes: more than 1,500 unserviceable magazine bodies of all sorts. There's likely a use for them, just not as magazines.

plus boom of the middle 1980s, and other space was acquired, most notably a huge warehouse in Plainfield, N.J.

The Union St. location was everything you'd want in a place for buying surplus: out of the way on an anonymous street; a little dark, a little funky, decorated with old prints and suits of armor. But most notably, it had a



Ever wonder what 400 BM-59 magazines look like? Some items come nicely wrapped. Most come piled in a crate like this, with attendant damage.



Here's a crate of Skorpion magazines and end caps. Seeing items like this in their original packaging makes visiting Sarco that much more fun.

stock of 20,000 or so guns at any time. It wasn't a place to shop for Purdeys or Weatherby Mark Vs, but if you were in search of a Swedish Mauser or a No. 4 Enfield, it was just the spot.

New Jersey's gun laws have been unusually oppressive for years, but Sarco managed to thrive there until a theft by a rogue employee brought the unwanted attention of the state police. After a long series of legal actions too complicated to relate here, it became apparent that Sarco would no longer be able to sell guns in its home state.

Fortunately, the prolonged legal wrangling gave Steen and son Butch, now No. 2 in the company, time to come up with an alternative plan, which was to move gun sales operations to a former fireworks factory in Easton, Pa. The new Sarco is literally at the first exit after you leave New Jersey, and the local government was happy to welcome one of the nation's most prominent firearms firms to town.

The Easton location shows both old and new sides of Sarco. It's a lot more airy and open, but maintains the thrifty Sarco tradition of recycling: a lot of the showcases are the former show booths of a defunct pistol importer. There are plenty of Yugo Mausers racked for sale, but also lots of modern AR-15s and pistols.

It's all part of a slow transition from a pure mail-order surplus and parts business to a model that includes face-to-face retailing and manufacturing. Where once a com-



Steen had these Chinese Browning .22 copies in the warehouse for years, but they all had cracked buttstocks. New stocks put them back in the game.

pany like Sarco would import whole guns and parts and sell the two separately, what's available these days often requires newly-made parts to make saleable merchandise.

Steen had been sitting, for example, on a load of Chinese-made copies of the Browning .22 auto that were missing the buttstocks. They weren't worth much that way. But he found a company to make the stocks, and now is assembling them into complete rifles priced at \$199.95. "There are still deals out there," he says, "but so many of them are like this one; they require more work than just buying and selling."

Similarly, Steen acquired a big load of Argentine .45 pistols: Systema Colts, Ballester Rigauds and Ballester-Molinas. These had clearly been well used for 70 years or more, with most having all traces of the original bluing worn off. He contracted to have them repaired and reblued, which will give Sarco very popularly priced .45s that also have some real history behind them.

Part of this deal was about 100 Dovitiis rifles from the 1890s. These were purchased by Uruguay and fired the 6.5mm Daudeteau cartridge. Only 37 of the 100 had bolts, so this group shapes up as another Steen long-term project.

Building guns from parts kits is getting to be a popular hobby, helped along in no small part by Steven Matthews' pieces here in SGN. Sarco has plenty of kits for guns like the M1919, RPD and Czech Vz61 Skorpion, and is manufacturing crucial pieces like barrels that often are missing.

Sarco has been a go-to source for the machine gun hobby for many years, both for parts and for accessories like belts, loaders, ammo cans and tripods. "Machine Gun Dave" Michels is a well-known authority on all things related to full-auto guns, though Steen is no slouch himself.

All the high-capacity magazines for machine guns, rifles and even pistols are in Easton now, ranging from commonplaces like M1 Carbine mags to oddities like huge curved Madsen light machine gun magazines. There was a time when I might have wondered just what anyone would do with a Madsen magazine, but Matthews' stories have shown that there's a use for just about anything if you have the skill and imagination.

While surplus is Sarco's main stock in trade, there are some interesting sporting arms in the warehouses, too.



Butch Steen shows SGN sales rep Pat Bentzel a Beretta over-under from a big and diverse load of firearms confiscated by the Israeli police.

The Israeli police sold off a huge stash of captured guns several years ago, and it contained everything from odd .22s from makers like Voere we don't see here to Beretta over-unders. Several years ago, Steen bought a load of confiscated arms from the Swedish police that contained a huge number of 16-gauge side-by-side doubles. Sarco's still selling those.

The Easton facility is primarily Butch's domain, while his father keeps working deals from his comfortably cluttered office in Stirling. "I'm to the point now where the fun part is working the deal, not so much making the deal," Steen says. Marie would like him to move more



A strong team for more than 50 years: SGN General Manager Bob Hunnicutt and Butch Steen try on a .50 cal. Browning and a 37mm Gatling Gun.



It's not all surplus: the Sarco retail store in Easton, Pa., features AR-15s from SGN advertisers like Rock River, Stag Arms and Windham Weaponry.



What's in there? Crate after crate of M1 rifle stocks go floor to ceiling in Sarco's Plainfield, N.J. warehouse. They're unlikely to run out soon.

from the acquisition side to the disposal side, but Cholly clearly loves the buying more than the selling.

Nowhere proves that more than the Plainfield warehouse, which is stacked to the ceiling with wooden crates containing everything you can think of and many you can't, like weather balloons and drone airplanes. Lots of them have holes bashed in the sides to provide visual access.

You might expect a lot of bar-coding and computer control, but the ultimate inventory list is between the Steen ears. "Somewhere in there we have nine tractor-

trailer loads I bought many years ago from Century Arms," Steen says. "Gotta find those one of these days." Butch says he's trying to get things more organized, in the conventional sense of the term, "but ultimately, it's all in Dad's head."

Ask his friends and competitors in the industry, and they'll tell you the key to the Steen formula is patience. Gun parts, if stored properly, never go bad, and most of them get more valuable through time, albeit slowly. Steen's genius is to see future value where others do not.

The first time I ever visited the Union Street facility, I stubbed my toe on a pile of torch-cut M1917 machine gun pintles. Other than trot line weights, I couldn't imagine any possible use of those demils. "Wouldn't it be better just to scrap those out?" I asked. "No way!" said an alarmed Steen. "Someone's going to want those someday."

The last time I visited, he still had them, and was still just as confident that someone out there was going to want them. And my guess is that, someday, someone will. ©