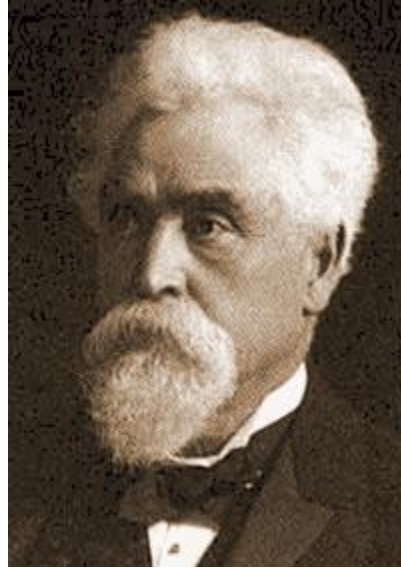


The History of Sir Hiram Maxim



On a small hill overlooking Dexter's Lake Wasookeag on a June day in 1890, a gathering of townspeople watched history in the making as bullets whizzed into the lake waters at a rate of 666 per minute. The small-town quiet was shattered as the gun swayed back and forth to show how a fast-moving army could be cut down in minutes. From that location, about 10 miles from his Sangerville home, Sir Hiram Maxim's gun entered the battlefields of the Russo-Japanese War and later World War I, World War II, and even the battlefields of Korea and Vietnam.

As a boy, Hiram Maxim lived at Brockway Mills, located off Silvers Mills Road. Born on the fifth of February, 1840 in a less than modest home - on a small knoll overlooking a stream, he tended sheep throughout the summer months. Legend has it, as a young lad he and his brother Hudson stood atop a large boulder outside their home and with raised arms pledged to themselves that someday they would become famous. Both men achieved fame and garnered themselves a place in the history books.

Hiram's only schooling was what he gleaned from five years of learning in a one-room Sangerville schoolhouse. At the age of 14, he was apprenticed to Daniel Sweat, an East Corinth carriage maker who had recently returned to

Sangerville. Hiram went to work for Mr. Sweat in Abbott and it was there that he perfected his first invention - an automatic mousetrap that soon rid the Abbot grist mill of mice. That invention was soon followed by others, including a silicate blackboard. Shortly afterward, young Maxim traveled through Canada, New England, and New York State, where he met Spencer D. Schuyler, founder of the United States Electric Lighting Co. Schuyler hired Maxim as his chief engineer and soon the former sheep-tender was busy working on dynamos, arc lamps and other electrical devices. In an impressive list of 271 patents filed, Maxim invented a prototype of a curling iron, an apparatus for demagnetizing watches, magno-electric machines, devices to prevent the rolling of ships, eyelet and riveting machines, aircraft artillery, a flying machine, smokeless powder, an aerial torpedo gun, coffee substitutes, and various oil, steam, and gas engines.

In 1881, Hiram Maxim went to Europe to attend the Electric Exhibition at Paris where he was decorated by the French Government for his work with electricity. Two years later, he began work on his first automatic gun. When it was publicly announced that an American electrical engineer had produced a gun that would load and fire itself by simply touching a button, the report was rebuked and labeled incredulous. When Maxim offered his invention to the U.S. War Department, they refused it, deeming it unworthy by U.S. military standards. Maxim returned to England and was soon visited in his workshop by English Royalty. A demonstration followed, and his automatic weapon was ordered for Her Majesty's Royal Forces. The Maxim Gun Co. was quickly formed and later merged with Nordenfelt Guns and Ammunition Co. of England, owned by Edward Vickers who developed the Vickers machine gun, an improvement of the Maxim.

In 1900, Maxim became a naturalized British Subject and was Knighted the following year by Queen Victoria. Hiram infrequently returned to America, and it was on one of these rare visits that he traveled to the site of his birthplace in Brockway Mills. This particular visit coincided with Sangerville's Centennial held June 13, 1914. Here was a gathering of Sangerville residents at the Town Hall where Hiram's son, Hiram Percy Maxim, read aloud a letter written by his father in London. The Centennial celebration also included an exhibition of moving pictures showing Sir Hiram Maxim and King George of England inspecting the now-famous gun.

It was during the Spring of 1914 that the Sangerville Woman's Club erected a sign on the lawn of the Town Hall attesting Sangerville as the birthplace of Sir Hiram Maxim. Presentation of this honor to the town was made by Mrs. Minnie Hayes, President of the Woman's Club. The sign was a project of the club conforming to the Community Improvement Department of the New England Conference of the State Federation of Women's Clubs. Nearly three decades later, the original sign was replaced by one proclaiming that Sir Harry Oakes was also a Sangerville native who was Knighted by the English Realm. Hence, Sangerville became known as the Town of Two Knights, the other honor belonging to Sir Harry Oakes. Sir Hiram Maxim died in his adopted homeland at Streathan on Nov. 24, 1916, at the age of 77.