

An accurate description of a gun's condition is essential in evaluating a firearm and estimating the value of any gun. Differences in condition can easily halve or double the value of a collectible gun. The terms used in evaluating firearms condition have specific meaning. The most widely used set of standards for grading firearms condition is that defined by the NRA many years ago..

Here are the standard gun condition rating terms, as defined by the National Rifle Association. It is vital to note that there are *separate rating systems used for Antique vs. Modern Firearms.*

## **NRA MODERN GUN CONDITION STANDARDS:**

**NEW:** Not previously sold at retail, in same condition as current factory production.

**PERFECT:** In New condition in every respect. *(Jim's note - in my experience, many collectors & dealers use "As New" to describe this condition).*

**EXCELLENT:** New condition, used but little, no noticeable marring of wood or metal, bluing perfect, (except at muzzle or sharp edges).

**VERY GOOD:** In perfect working condition, no appreciable wear on working surfaces, no corrosion or pitting, only minor surface dents or scratches.

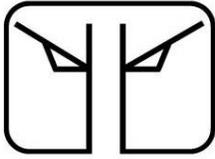
**GOOD:** In safe working condition, minor wear on working surfaces, no broken parts, no corrosion or pitting that will interfere with proper functioning.

**FAIR:** In safe working condition but well worn, perhaps requiring replacement of minor parts or adjustments which should be indicated in advertisement, no rust, but may have corrosion pits which do not render article unsafe or inoperable.

## **NRA ANTIQUE FIREARM CONDITIONS STANDARDS:**

**FACTORY NEW:** All original parts; 100% original finish; in perfect condition in every respect, inside and out.

**EXCELLENT:** All original parts; over 80% original finish; sharp lettering, numerals and design on metal and wood; unmarred wood; fine bore.



**FINE:** All original parts; over 30% original finish; sharp lettering, numerals and design on metal and wood; minor marks in wood; good bore.

**VERY GOOD:** All original parts; none to 30% original finish; original metal surfaces smooth with all edges sharp; clear lettering, numerals and design on metal; wood slightly scratched or bruised; bore disregarded for collectors firearms.

**GOOD:** Some minor replacement parts; metal smoothly rusted or lightly pitted in places, cleaned or re-blued; principal letters, numerals and design on metal legible; wood refinished, scratched bruised or minor cracks repaired; in good working order.

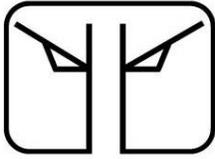
**FAIR:** Some major parts replaced; minor replacement parts may be required; metal rusted, may be lightly pitted all over, vigorously cleaned or re-blued; rounded edges of metal and wood; principal lettering, numerals and design on metal partly obliterated; wood scratched, bruised, cracked or repaired where broken; in fair working order or can be easily repaired and placed in working order.

**POOR:** Major and minor parts replaced; major replacement parts required and extensive restoration needed; metal deeply pitted; principal lettering, numerals and design obliterated, wood badly scratched, bruised, cracked or broken; mechanically inoperative; generally undesirable as a collector's firearm.

## **Other rating systems:**

**PERCENTAGE OF ORIGINAL FINISH SYSTEM** - This system is widely used by collectors and dealers, and has been popularized by Fjestad's excellent price guide, Blue Book of Gun Values. It's important to note that this system usually refers to the PERCENTAGE OF ORIGINAL FINISH REMAINING ON THE METAL SURFACES. Note that if a gun has no original finish remaining this system does not really apply. Also, if a gun has been refinished, it would not be ratable under the Blue Book system, altho a percentage description may be used such as "90% of factory refinish remains". This is an accurate description, but if using the Blue Book as a price guide, remember that it applies only to ORIGINAL factory finish.

**STANDARD CATALOG OF FIREARMS SYSTEM** - The Standard Catalog of Firearms by Ned Schwing is an excellent price guide, especially useful since it's photo illustrated. It uses condition rating terms that use the same words as the NRA system such as "Excellent" "Very Good", etc. However:



**\* WARNING!!! - Std. Cat. of Firearms Definitions are very different than the widely accepted NRA standards.** Their definitions are roughly similar for Modern guns, but their **Antique gun standards are radically different.** For example, an antique firearm that rated "Excellent" under NRA Antique Standards might only rate "Very Good" under the Std. Cat. of Firearms definitions.

**OTHER PRICE GUIDE SYSTEMS** - Any time you refer to a price guide, the first thing to do is to check the definition of firearm condition standards, to see if it's the same as the standard NRA system, or has different definitions.

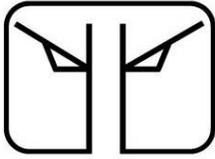
### **Supica's rating system:**

Generally, my ratings are based on the NRA condition definitions. In Richard Nahas & my book, Standard Catalog of S&W, I expanded the NRA definitions. Those expanded definitions are generally what I have in mind when rating guns for sale on ArmchairGunShow.com or in the Old Town Station Dispatch mail order catalog. Here's my system:

**NEW IN BOX (NIB), or AS NEW:** NIB means in the same condition as when the gun left the factory, with accompanying box, literature, and accessories. This is important to note, as older boxes may have substantial value in themselves. Purists will want the box to be the original box which that particular gun was shipped in (serial number was often penciled on the bottom or marked on the end of the box by the factory).

As to the condition of the gun itself, the gun must be unfired and unused. Comparable terms expressing the same gun condition when not accompanied by box might include "AS NEW", "MINT", "PERFECT", or "100%". Even if the gun has never been fired, if the action has been worked to the extent that wear is visible, the value may be less than "NIB" or "AS NEW" to a collector. For example, the faint drag line that appears on the cylinder of a revolver that has been "dry-fired" a few times will reduce the value to less than "AS NEW" for a condition purist on an out of production revolver. This sort of general "shop-wear" to an otherwise new, current production gun will not matter to a buyer purchasing the gun to shoot. It rapidly becomes more important to a "condition collector" who wants a truly pristine example of an out-of-production piece.

Generally this condition is seldom found in older antique guns, but an older antique gun that is NIB or AS NEW will bring substantial premium over antique Excellent



condition - sometimes bringing double or more what the same model would bring in Excellent condition.

**EXCELLENT (EXC):** All original parts and configuration. For modern guns, nearly new condition, with only slight finish wear at muzzle or sharp edges. For antique guns, sharp markings, unmarred grips, fine bore. Also, excellent guns should generally exhibit at least the following percentages of original finish, depending on production era & type of finish:

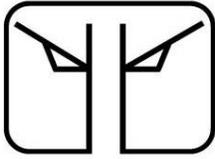
| TIME ERA  | BLUED GUNS | NICKEL GUNS |
|-----------|------------|-------------|
| post 1945 | 98%        | 99+%        |
| 1920-1945 | 95%        | 98%         |
| 1890-1920 | 90%        | 95%         |
| 1865-1890 | 85%        | 90%         |
| pre 1865  | 80%        | 85%         |

(For comparison, NRA definitions require that Modern Exc. have “bluing perfect, except at muzzle or sharp edges”, and that Antique Exc. retain “over 80% original finish“.)

Stainless steel: Due to the durability of the finish, most used stainless steel guns are found in excellent to very good condition so long as they are unmodified and in perfect working order.

**FINE:** This condition rating applies primarily to older and antique guns. All original parts and configuration, or possibly a very minor alteration from original configuration that was made during the period of use (fancy grips added, sight configuration changed slightly, etc.). Sharp markings, only minor grip blemishes, good bore. Minor replaced parts may be acceptable on antique guns, but will effect value. Also, at least the following percentage of original finish by production era & type of finish:

| TIME ERA  | BLUED GUNS | NICKEL GUNS |
|-----------|------------|-------------|
| 1920-1945 | 90 %       | 95%         |
| 1890-1920 | 70%        | 80%         |
| 1865-1890 | 50%        | 70%         |
| pre 1865  | 30%        | 50%         |



(For comparison, there is no NRA standard for “Modern Fine”. NRA “Antique Fine” requires “over 30% original finish”.)

**Factory refinish:** A factory refinished antique S&W with 98% of the refinish remaining, which was in excellent condition before refinishing (i.e., sharp markings, no pitting remaining under refinish) may approach Fine in value.

**VERY GOOD (VG):** All original major parts. For modern guns, must be in perfect working order, no corrosion or pitting, minor scratches only. For antique guns, smooth metal and sharp edges, clear markings. Mismatched parts from the same model, or minor replaced parts may be acceptable on older guns, but will effect value. Also, at least the following percentage of original finish depending on production era. (At this condition level, the difference between blue & nickel finish required is not significant.)

Post 1945: 85%

1920-1945: 60%

1890-1920: 40%

1865-1890: 10%

Pre 1865: less than 10%

(For comparison purposes, NRA “Modern Very Good” discusses general surface condition, while NRA “Antique Very Good” requires “zero to 30% original finish.”)

**Refinish & Modification** -- The following classes of refinished or modified guns may approach “Very Good” in value:

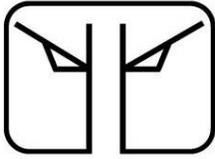
Modern guns with at least 98% of a factory or arsenal refinish.

Pre-1945 guns with at least 98% of a modern professional refinish or restoration.

Antique guns with at least 85% of a factory refinish or old period of use refinish.

Pre-1920 guns with major period-of-use modifications (for example, bobbed barrel) which are otherwise about Fine or better.

**GOOD:** Good working order. Markings are legible. There may be properly matched replaced parts, minor repairs and light pitting. May be professionally refinished. Grips may be worn or cracked, but should be serviceable. Configuration may have been modified. Bores should be shootable on modern guns, but are disregarded on antique guns. Older antique guns may lack any original finish, but modern guns in Good



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condition will probably show at least the following percentages base on production era:

ERA FINISH

Post 1945: 75%

1920-1945: 60%

1890-1920: 30%

(For comparison, neither NRA Modern nor NRA Antique definitions specifically address percent of original finish for “Good” or lower condition guns.)

**FAIR:** Modern guns must be in safe working condition, but can be well worn, showing visible repair or replacement parts, or needing adjustment or minor repair. May be pitted so long as pitting does not effect function or safety. Antique guns may have major parts replaced and minor parts missing, may be rusted, pitted, heavily buffed or refinished, may have rounded edges, illegible markings, cracked or broken grips, and should be working or easily repaired.

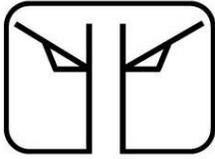
**POOR:** Broken, poorly refinished, heavily rusted and pitted, or otherwise generally undesirable. Most often valued only as project guns for amateur gunsmiths, curiosities for display, or parts guns.

**Applying the above standards** - These condition ratings represent an attempt to describe the general overall condition of a gun in a single word. Variation from a single aspect of any condition definition does not exclude a gun from that classification. For example, a gun that was in otherwise “Excellent” condition except for a broken grip would not be reduced to “Fair” condition for that reason alone. However, a responsible description of any gun will mention any variation from the standard of definition for the condition rating, and any variances will most likely affect the monetary value.

**Notes**

**Most recent production guns are found in good or better condition, since it seems to take decades of heavy use &/or substantial abuse to reduce a quality modern firearm to fair or poor condition.**

**Collectors of some early to mid 20th Century firearms, have commented that, for high condition guns, a more precise estimate of original finish remaining is essential. The difference between a 98% and a 99.5% gun can make a significant difference in value, especially in rare variations.**



## **Comparison to NRA Standards.**

**The above condition definitions were approached with some trepidation. To some, they may appear unnecessarily complex and something of a Frankenstein monster of stitched together concepts.**

**My intent is not to change or replace the NRA definitions, but to refine them. I also hoped to incorporate a more specific application of the popular “percent of original finish” rating method into the familiar NRA style terminology, and address some factors that are important to value, but which are ignored by other systems.**

**Above all, I attempted to capture the underlying sense of these condition terms as they are most often used “in the field” by collectors and dealers when evaluating firearms.**

**To fully understand the intent of the above condition definitions, it is helpful to consider the well accepted NRA condition definitions. NRA has established two different sets of condition standards for antique and modern firearms.**

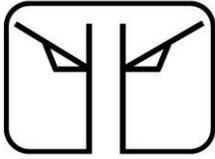
**As you can see at the top of this page, these NRA definitions are rather concise and elegant, and designed to apply to a wide range of firearms in a wide range of conditions.**

**What I have tried to do is to focus them on S&Ws, particularly addressing the following concerns:**

### **Disparity Between Antique and Modern Definitions:**

**The widely differing NRA standards for antique and modern guns make a great deal of sense when you consider that they must cover both a seventeenth century flintlock and a year 2000 production polymer framed semi-auto. However, they can cause a problem in S&Ws when the products span both sides of the modern/antique line.**

**While the NRA guidelines do not define “antique” and “modern”, under Federal law the cutoff date between modern and antique firearms is 1898 -- those made in or before that year are antique, with more recent production being modern. Hence, if you take two top-break revolvers, both in 80% original finish condition, but one made in 1898 and the other in 1899, the antique gun would be rated excellent while the modern gun would be closer to good.**



You will notice that in this book, we have tended to apply antique condition terminology (i.e., “Fine” condition listed, but no “NIB”) to tip-up and top-break revolvers, even though some top-breaks were produced as late as 1940. Likewise we’ve applied modern condition terminology (i.e., “NIB” condition listed, but no “Fine”) to hand ejectors even though some were produced as early as 1896. This was done primarily to avoid artificial breaks in condition ratings based on an arbitrary cutoff date.

Regardless of whether the values listed in this book include “Fine” (as with NRA Antique) or “NIB” (as with NRA Modern), the condition required to reach a certain level in this book will depend to a certain extent on the actual vintage of the gun and application of our sliding scale.

It seems to us that collectors and dealers evaluating an older gun tend, perhaps unconsciously, to apply their own internal mental version of this sliding scale concept, expecting more original finish on more recently produced guns to attain the same condition description.

#### **Disparity Between Guns Produced Decades Apart:**

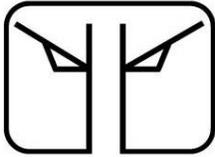
In real life, the more recently the gun was produced, the better the condition it is likely to be found in. It would create an unrealistic picture of the marketplace to insist that an 1858 First First would have to have the same objective amount of condition to be considered Antique Excellent as an 1898 .32 HE 1st Model. The same rationale would apply to an 1899 New Departure compared to a Sigma under the modern ratings.

#### **Disparity of Original Finish Remaining within a Definition:**

This is probably most apparent in the NRA Antique Fine definition, which includes guns with 30% to 80% original finish. In practice, an antique gun with 80% original finish may bring a price double or more that of one with 30% original finish.

In our experience, collectors and dealers tend to make unconscious mental adjustments in their rating and pricing to adapt to these disparities. To reflect this we have tried to build a sliding scale of condition relative to era into the book’s definitions, without going outside of the accepted ranges of the NRA definitions. We have also attempted to account for the fact that, all other things being equal, a collector will want to see a slightly greater percentage of original finish remaining on a nickel gun that he will on a blued gun to assign similar values to each.

#### **The Real World of Modified and Refinished Guns:**



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**There is little allowance in the NRA definitions for otherwise high condition guns that have been refinished or modified during their period of use. Our experience is that these guns find ready buyers at higher prices than their strict NRA condition rating would warrant, so we have tried to include these in the scope of the book's definitions. Particularly, factory refinished guns and Western era modified guns are of special interest to S&W collectors, as discussed earlier.**