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AY 26, 1874, IN Comanche, Texas, was Race Day, and thoroughbreds and mustangs alike galloped to the finish line, making owners and lucky gamblers wealthy. In the aftermath of the boisterous festivities, jovial winners were celebrating their gains and making the circuit of the saloons on the square. Leading the group was a young Texan with a checkered past and several successful horses: 21-year-old John Wesley Hardin.

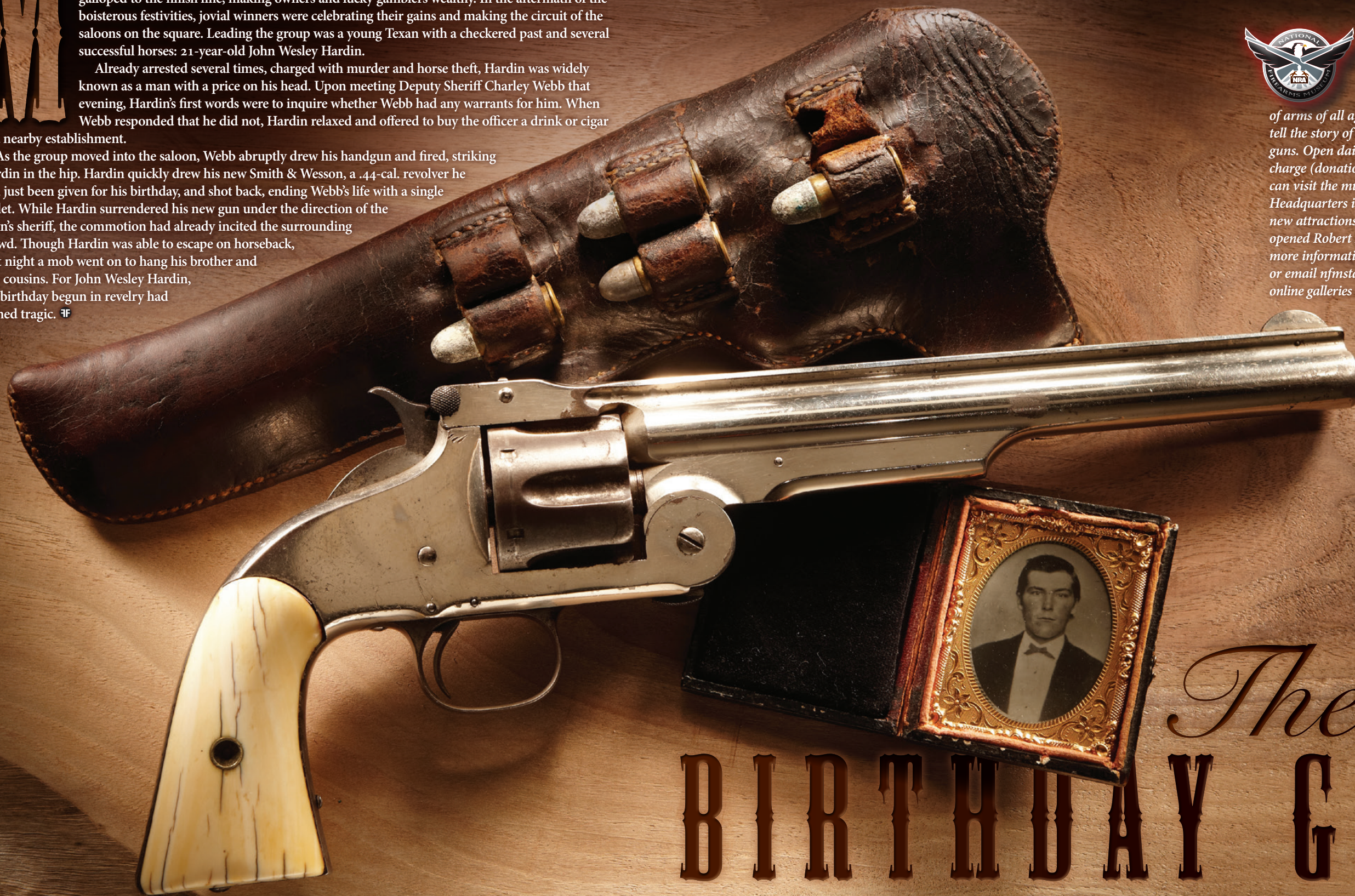
Already arrested several times, charged with murder and horse theft, Hardin was widely known as a man with a price on his head. Upon meeting Deputy Sheriff Charley Webb that evening, Hardin's first words were to inquire whether Webb had any warrants for him. When Webb responded that he did not, Hardin relaxed and offered to buy the officer a drink or cigar in a nearby establishment.

As the group moved into the saloon, Webb abruptly drew his handgun and fired, striking Hardin in the hip. Hardin quickly drew his new Smith & Wesson, a .44-cal. revolver he had just been given for his birthday, and shot back, ending Webb's life with a single bullet. While Hardin surrendered his new gun under the direction of the town's sheriff, the commotion had already incited the surrounding crowd. Though Hardin was able to escape on horseback, that night a mob went on to hang his brother and two cousins. For John Wesley Hardin, the birthday begun in revelry had turned tragic. ㊦



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of arms of all ages and exhibits that tell the story of Americans and their guns. Open daily with no admission charge (donations appreciated), you can visit the museum's galleries at NRA Headquarters in Fairfax, Va., to see new attractions, including the newly opened Robert E. Petersen Gallery. For more information, call (703) 267-1600 or email nfmstaff@nrahq.org. View the online galleries at www.nramuseum.com.



The BIRTHDAY GUN