

GunDigest® Presents

# CLASSIC SPORTING RIFLES

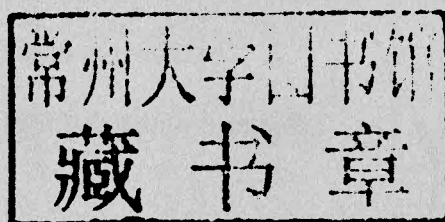


Edited by Terry Wieland

GunDigest Presents

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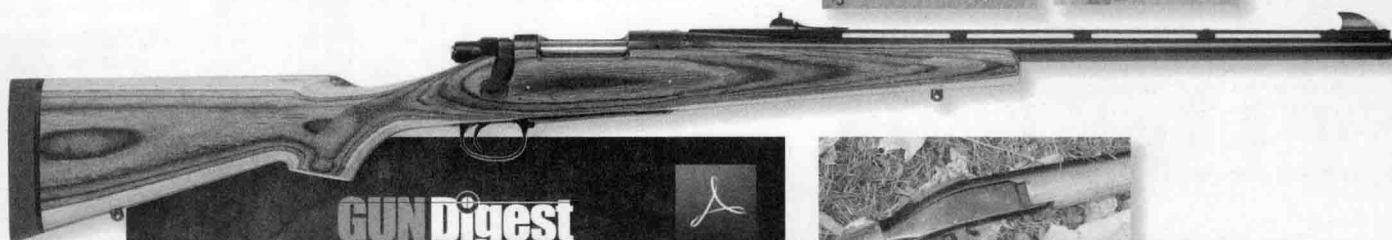
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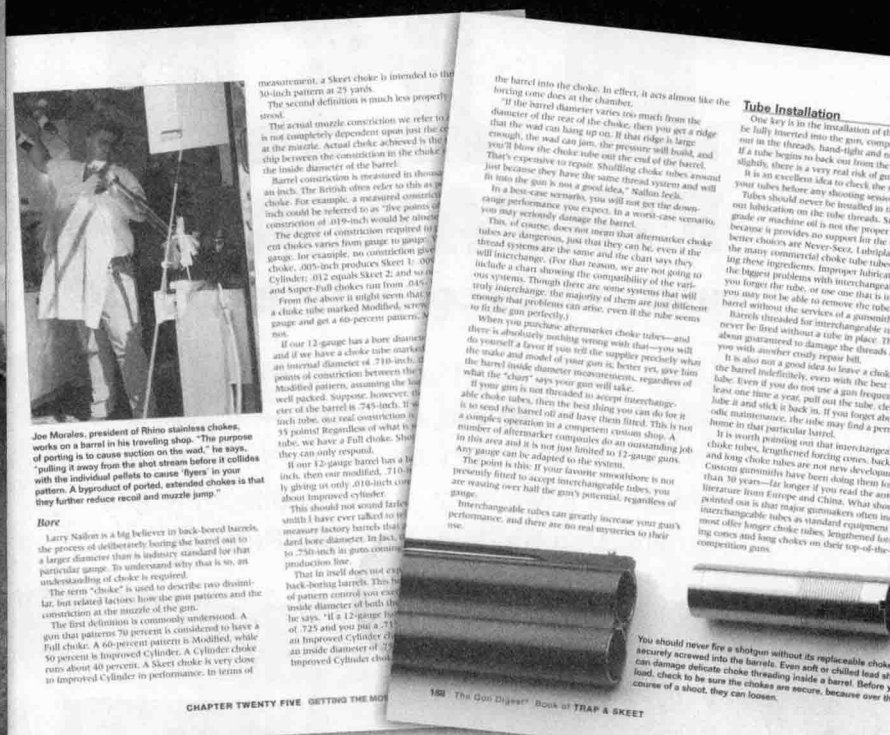
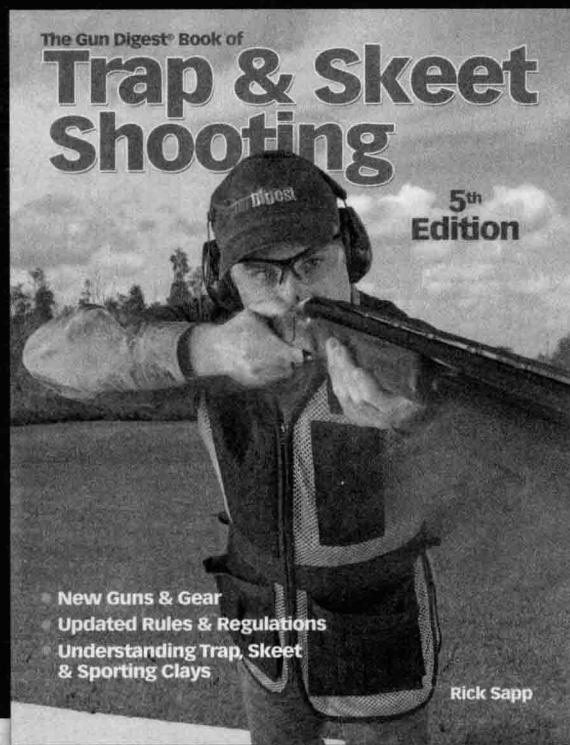
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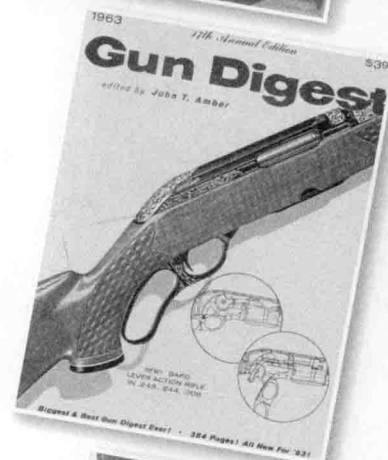
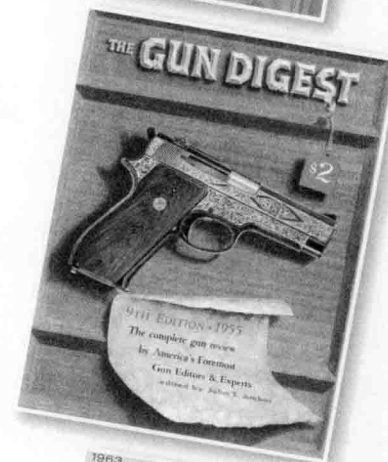
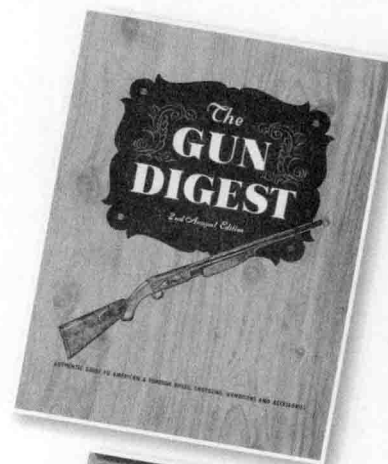
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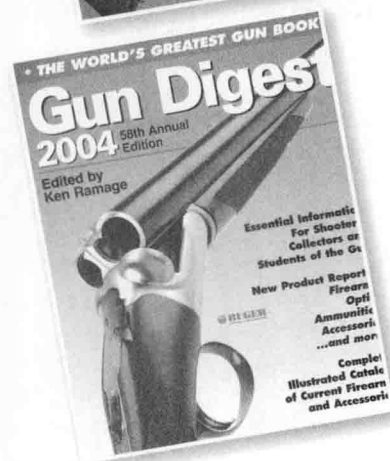
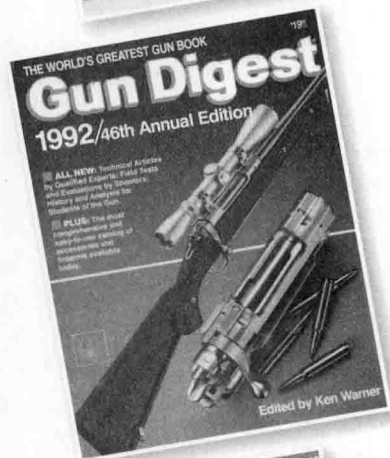
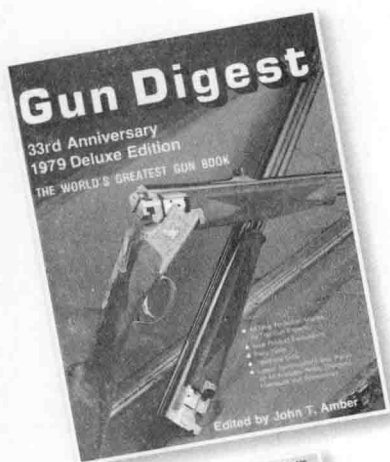
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**SPORTING**

**RIFLES**

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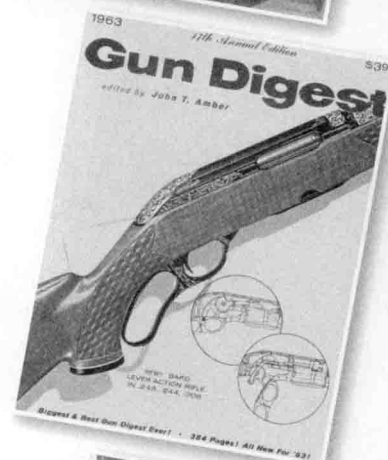
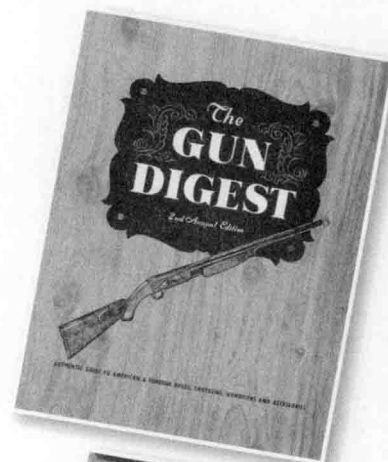
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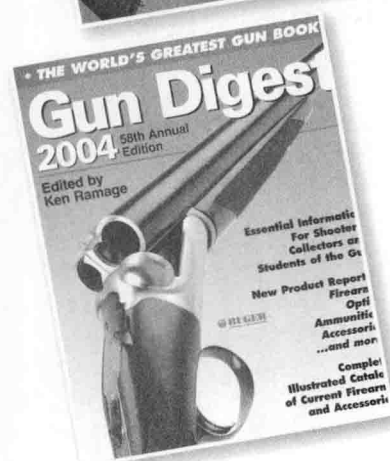
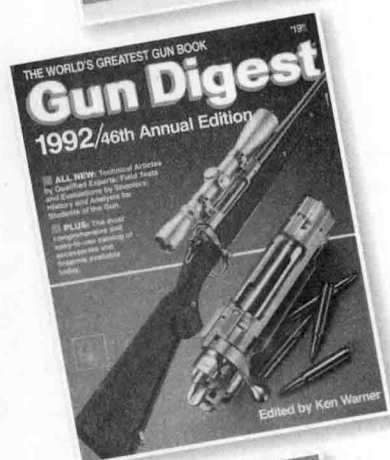
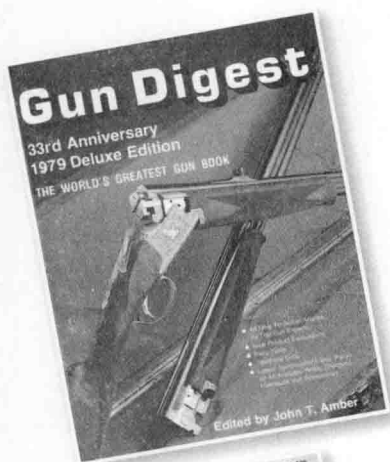
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# Introduction

The hunting rifle is the most iconic of American firearms.

FROM DAVID CROCKETT in Tennessee with “Old Betsy,” to the mountain men and their Hawken’s, to the buffalo hunters, the Sharps, and the Winchester ’73 – these are names and places that fire the imagination of both hunters and historians.

The history of the American hunting rifle is not limited to America. The lineage of our favorite firearm can be traced back through the German gunmakers who settled rural Pennsylvania and developed the gun that came to be known as the “Kentucky” rifle. In many ways, the rifles we use today sprang from that root.

Since 1944, *Gun Digest* has recounted both the history of the rifle as it was in years past, and the hunting rifle as it was being developed in the years after World War Two. In many ways, the pages of *Gun Digest* are a living history of the rifle.

John T. Amber, the *Digest’s* legendary editor from 1951 to 1981, was first and foremost a rifleman. He loved all firearms, but rifles were his pets. He named

his home in Illinois, Creedmoor Farm, after that most famous of 19th century American shooting ranges, and went out of his way to commission the most knowledgeable riflemen of the 20th century to record their thoughts and observations in the pages of *Gun Digest*.

Winnowing down the scores of hunting-rifle articles that appeared here to just the 32 best was difficult, and required a sometimes ruthless determination to stick to the subject and not be tempted no matter how fascinating a particular article might be. And so, many fine pieces of writing that deserve a second (or third, or fourth) look were eliminated from consideration.

For example, we differentiate between articles about rifles and the calibers for which they are chambered. A very good article about the .350 Remington Magnum was one of the last to be eliminated; another, on the .577 Nitro Express, did not make the cut. Someday, perhaps, we will do a book just on calibers,

and certainly there is enough excellent material to do so.

Because this is an anthology of previously published articles, we are limited in some ways. Much as we might like a balance of, for example, single-shots versus semiautos, the *Digest* published much more about the older rifles than new ones. The current interest in the AR-15 design as a hunting rifle was not covered. And, it seems, the *Digest’s* editors and contributors were more interested in single-shots and double rifles than they were in the crop of semiautomatic hunting rifles that sprouted after 1960.

Surprisingly, they were even more interested in those rifles than they were in that most American of hunting guns, the lever action. And so we find ourselves with what might seem to be a preponderance of articles about the big British double rifles, compared to levers and bolts.

We approached the task of selecting the 32 finest pieces on hunt-



ing rifles with two thoughts in mind. One was to present material that is not readily found elsewhere; second, to present the thoughts of the most knowledgeable and respected writers of that era – often, to newer readers who might never have read their work.

The first section, “Choosing the Hunting Rifle,” includes a who’s who of rifle writers from the 20th century: Col. Townsend Whelen (a.k.a., Mr. Rifleman); Elmer Keith, Jack O’Connor, Warren Page, Jim Carmichel. In the early years, John Amber liked to have at least one overview piece in every issue, and alternated among the very best writers of the time. And so, we have O’Connor’s thoughts one year, those of Elmer Keith the next.

Although O’Connor and Keith had the most publicized personal rivalry of two writers – one espousing small caliber, high velocity rifles, the other large bores and heavy bullets – in fact they did not disagree on much. But their views on ballistics aside, they were two unique personalities and it shows in their writing.

Some of the articles in this anthology deserve special mention. Jack O’Connor on “The Sheep Rifle” is definitive, and as valid today as it was a half-century ago; similarly, Elmer Keith’s “The Deadly Dependable Double” may well have been the foundation for the renewed interest in British double rifles that began in the 1970s.

Others we have included were less well-known to modern readers, but made a great contribution to hunting literature through their technical writing. Ned Roberts, developer of the .257 Roberts cartridge, was born just after the Civil War and grew up witnessing the development of cartridge rifles, and later the transition from black powder to smokeless. He died just as the .220 Swift appeared on the scene. In terms of technological culture shock, for a shooter, that is comparable to watching the transition from horse-and-buggy to space flight.

Aside from cartridge development, Ned Roberts’s other great interest was shooting percussion rifles, and here we have his thoughts

on “Shooting the Muzzle-Loading Cap Lock Rifle.”

Frank de Haas, author of an early Digest Books publication, “Bolt Action Rifles,” that has since (like “Cartridges of the World”) become the bible on the subject, was also known as “Mr. Single Shot.” Here we have de Haas’s views on the Sharps side-hammer rifle, alongside Col. Whelen’s personal retrospective “My Single Shot Rifles” – surely a treasure for anyone who likes to hunt with these magnificent guns.

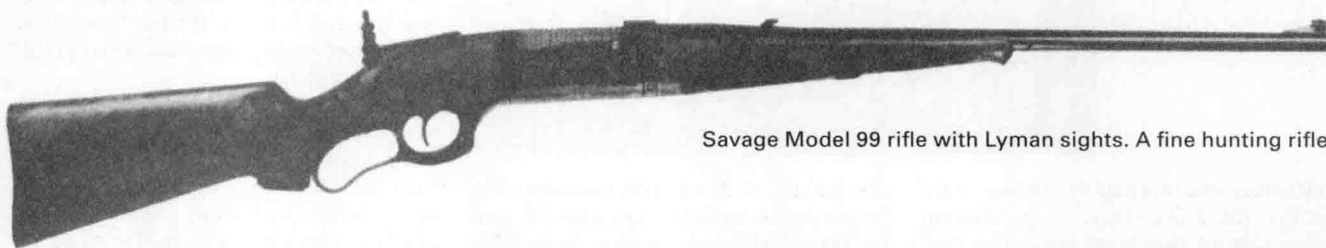
Given the range of writers we have included, their lives, their interests, and their adventures, we hope there is something in this volume for the hunter, the historian, the gun collector, and for those who just love to sit by a fire when it’s raining outside, and read about guns.

*Gun Digest* was the most influential firearms publication of the 20th century. It not only recorded history, it shaped the tastes and interests of several generations of hunters and shooters. Here are the writers who did that.



# Notes on the Hunting Rifle

■ Col. Townsend Whelen



Savage Model 99 rifle with Lyman sights. A fine hunting rifle.

**T**HERE ARE MANY important details to consider in the selection of a hunting rifle other than mere caliber and model. Indeed, within well-known limits, the latter are relatively unimportant.

It is fifty-nine years ago this fall since I shot my first deer and won my first rifle match. It was about then that wandering with my rifle through snow-capped mountains got into my soul — and I am still wandering. There is an old Arab saying: "Allah reckons not against a man's allotted days the time he spends in shikar."

The most important factors in successful hunting for rifle game are physical fitness and marksmanship, both attained and retained only by intelligent training. Unless a sportsman is at least a fair shot, he will not be successful with the finest rifle. There is no substitute for marksmanship. Indeed I would go a step further and require a qualification as Marksman or better according to Army, National Guard, or NRA regulations as a requisite for a hunting license.

I will therefore presume a fair degree of skill in marksmanship, usually acquired on the range. But skill in target shooting alone will not insure the successful use of the rifle in the hunting field. The sportsman must also be thoroughly familiar with the identical weapon he is going to use in hunting. I am very strong for selecting a first-class, suitable rifle at the start, and then sticking with it for years. Almost all the failures that cannot be traced to

physical unfitness or general marksmanship are due to the hunter's being unfamiliar with his rifle. Those who have such failures are almost sure to blame the rifle, and to make a change next season to the great benefit of the manufacturer and dealer but not to themselves.

When you get a good rifle, it should not be put in moth balls until the hunting season, but should be stood in the corner of your bedroom. Almost every day you should take it in hand and "dry shoot" with it at some small object out your window. Learn its fit, feel, trigger squeeze, sights, and quick operation until every form of handling it becomes subconscious. You must not have to look at or think about your rifle to use it effectively, and fast if necessary. Preferably do this with the one rifle you will use for hunting only. In your manual you will find sections called Position, Aiming, Trigger Squeeze, Rapid Fire Exercises, and the like, which contain all the essentials of effective use of a rifle. If you will keep this up always so long as you own that rifle, then the sure planting of your bullet in the chest or shoulder of a deer at 50 yards will also become subconscious, and ninety percent of the shots you get in the game fields will be that easy.

Occasional visits to the rifle range are also desirable. Here you verify your sight adjustment and your ability to hit, and by finding your bullets striking in or close to the bull's-eye you get that confidence in yourself and your weapon which is the only sure cure for buck fever. I practice

what I preach. In my younger days I used four rifles over a period of eight years of hunting. The last fifty years, however, have seen but three weapons occupying the seat of honor in my gunrack, each of which, in its turn of years, I took into the woods and mountains after big game. This does not include varmint rifles, of which I have used a flock. The results speak for themselves — 113 animals killed in 133 shots; number wounded and escaped, 8; number missed, 6.

Now, if you please, we will omit all rifles and cartridges that are not now in current production in the United States. Some of these were obsoleted for sufficient reasons, and some for commercial (financial) reasons only. Some of the latter were, and still are, most excellent; but I am presenting practical suggestions, not history. We will also divide modern American hunting rifles into four classes: *Big Game Rifles*, *All-Around Rifles*, *Varmint Rifles*, and *Small Game Rifles*. It will be much clearer if I treat each class separately.

## Big Game Rifles

I am not one of those who deride the old 30-30 cartridge. Over half a century I have seen it perform well in the hands of skillful hunters, and I myself have shot 44 deer, 1 ram, and 4 Rocky Mountain goats with it. But I would exclude it from use on elk, moose, and grizzly bear for humanitarian reasons. I would not think of advising a change from a good 30-30 rifle that a

<sup>1</sup> For example, Handbook on Small Bore Rifle Shooting, published by Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute.



It is not necessary to have level ground to assume the steady prone position. Colonel Whelen shooting.



sportsman was thoroughly familiar with, but I do think that if you are purchasing a new rifle for deer-sized animals, it had better be one for the 300 Savage or the 35 Remington cartridges.

At this point we should consider the matter of breech actions. Obsolescence has narrowed our choice to only two types — lever actions and bolt actions — for the pump and the automatic have now disappeared from the market<sup>2</sup>. The lever actions, by reason of their accuracy, and the trajectory of their cartridges, are 150-yard rifles, or 200 yards at the very limit. Their method and ease of operation are such that the beginner will become thoroughly familiar with them in a shorter time than with a bolt action. If you are more or less a beginner, are getting a new rifle, and have only a month at home to become familiar with it (see above), and if your hunting is to be in more or less wooded country, then I think you would be wise to choose a lever action. Also, in any case, if you know that all your hunting is going to be confined to the East, with never an opportunity to get into Western “long range” country, then I think the lever action is a wise choice. Two models seem to be outstanding for the deer hunter — the Savage Model 99 in 300 Savage caliber, and the Marlin Model

336 for the 35 Remington cartridge. The Savage has long been very popular, and the new Marlin 35 is proving remarkably accurate and a hard hitter. If elk, moose, and grizzly are to be included, then the Winchester Model 71 in 348 caliber is a most excellent weapon; but its power is unnecessary for the smaller species, and its recoil may be ruinous to a fellow in his first season of shooting, though not to a seasoned rifleman. The 300 and 35 cartridges in the main will be fairly good also for the larger animals, but there is always a chance for a failure with them, while the 250-grain bullet in the 348 cartridge is ample for any animal on this continent, even the Alaskan brown bear.

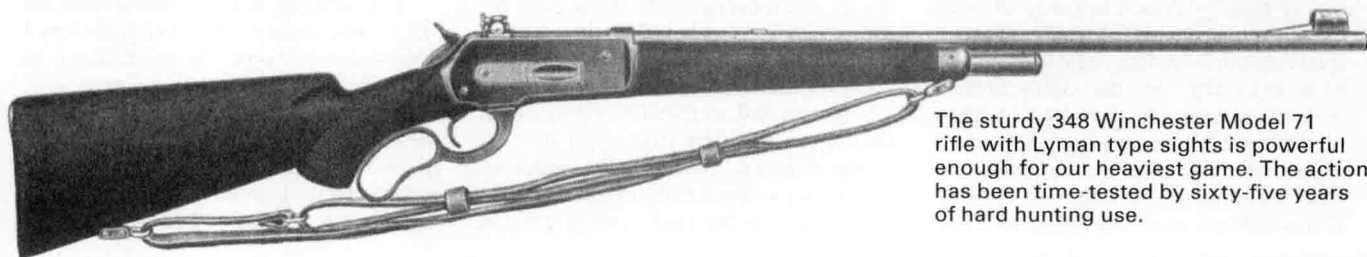
By reason of their accuracy, and the flat trajectory and sustained killing power of some of their cartridges, the bolt actions are pre-eminently the long-range rifles for the open mountains and plains of the West. But it should not be thought that they are in any way unsuitable for the more moderate distances encountered in woods hunting. For those who will take the trouble and the few minutes' daily time to become familiar with them, they are as good woods rifles as any. Today's choice narrows down to the Winchester Model 70, the Remington Models 721

and 722, the Fabrique Nationale Mauser, and Weatherby Mauser, all most excellent weapons in every way, superbly dependable. With these bolt actions we are considering big-game shooting exclusively, and this narrows our choice down to the 270 W.C.F., 30-06 U.S., and 300 H & H Magnum cartridges, all in their proper varieties of bullets suitable for all American big game. The ballistic differences between these cartridges are of little concern to the usual sportsman, and will be apparent only to the experienced hunter-rifleman, who is entirely competent to choose wisely between them. The last three rifles I have used on big game have been in the first two calibers.

The 375 H & H Magnum cartridge needs special but short mention. Because of its recoil I do not believe any sportsman can use this cartridge effectively unless he has had about a season's range practice with rifles having the recoil of about that of the 30-06. In fact, an attempt to use a 375 on one's first hunting trip will probably result in much poor shooting through dread of recoil, and certainly it is no caliber with which to develop one's skill in marksmanship. Also the use of a rifle taking this cartridge and fitted with a telescope sight is downright dangerous for the beginner because of the danger of the eyepiece of the scope recoiling into the eye should he assume a rather insecure firing position. But this rifle in the hands of a seasoned rifleman is a superb weapon for our heavier species of game. It insures both success and safety in hunting the Alaskan brown bear, and it will give you a larger percentage of one-shot kills on elk than lighter calibers will. It is needlessly heavy and expensive for other American game.

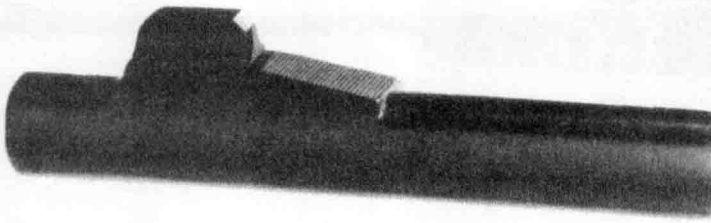
### Important, and Oh So True!

Now we come to some extremely important matters that pertain to all classes of rifles. I do not believe it is possible for any sportsman to walk into a sporting goods store, select a rifle of suitable model and caliber, and do good shooting with it,

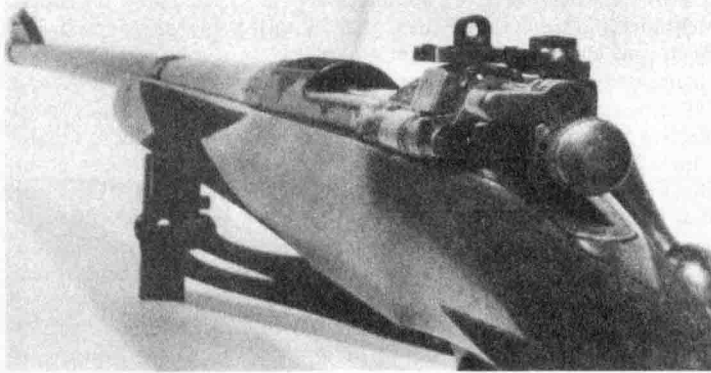


The sturdy 348 Winchester Model 71 rifle with Lyman type sights is powerful enough for our heaviest game. The action has been time-tested by sixty-five years of hard hunting use.

<sup>2</sup> It is rumored that a new pump-action hunting rifle will soon appear on the market. Naturally I am unfamiliar with it.



The new Redfield "Sourdough" front sight has a gold facing that appears square with a flat top when aiming, and its 45° angle reflects the sky light to the eye so that the sight shows bright and distinct when aiming in any direction.



The cup disc provided with most receiver sights should be removed, and only the large "Lyman" type aperture should be used for hunting.



Lyman No. 57 Receiver Sight. Each graduation on the slide is 3 minutes. Turning the coin-slotted head one complete revolution elevates the sight 3 minutes, or turning it one graduation elevates a quarter minute. One minute changes the point of impact one inch per hundred yards. Windage works similarly. Redfield No. 70 Receiver Sights work on the same principle. Note the cup disc which should always be unscrewed for hunting.

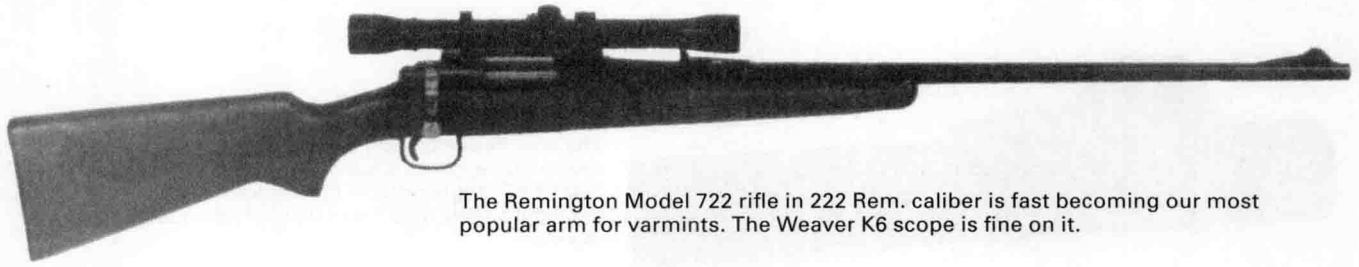
no matter how much he tries, in the condition in which he purchases it. This is because open rear sights and heavy trigger pulls are almost invariably standard on all rifles you can buy over the counter.

I will have absolutely nothing to do with the obsolete and hopelessly handicapping open rear sight. I do not know how to teach anyone to shoot well with a rifle fitted with this sight, nor do I know of any competent coach who can do so. I will not go into the reasons, for I have enumerated them often in my previous writings. The only good thing I have ever heard said for the open rear sight is that if it were not for it we would have no deer left in America to hunt.

The only iron sights to be considered on any game rifle are a large gold, ivory, or red faced front sight and a "Lyman" type receiver sight. The facing on the front sight should be flat, and it should either be inclined at an angle of about 45° so that it will reflect the sky light back to the eye, or there should be a mirror reflector in its base to reflect the sky light against its colored face. Other front sights appear bright and distinct only when the major light is back of the hunter. A flat-top post, at least .07" wide, is much better than a round bead. The Redfield "Sourdough" and the King Reflector front sight with square bead are particularly indicated.

The "Lyman" type rear sight consists

basically of a very large peep (about 1/8" hole) in a very small disc (about 3/8" in diameter). The sight must be located on the rear of the receiver, quite close to the eye. Such sights usually come with a large disc with small peep-hole screwed into the Lyman peep. This disc you can just throw away so far as hunting is concerned. When you aim with a Lyman peep sight, you should look *through* the peep, not at it. It then appears like a thin, slightly blurred ring, and the opening quite big. It does not obscure any of the game or the landscape. When you start to aim with it out your window at home, you should take pains to center the *top* of the front sight in the center of the blurred ring.



The Remington Model 722 rifle in 222 Rem. caliber is fast becoming our most popular arm for varmints. The Weaver K6 scope is fine on it.

Aim thus for your first fifteen practices. After that you give up all attempt to center the top of the front sight in the peep, and merely look through the peep, place the top of the front sight on the aiming point, and attend to your trigger squeeze. It is something like shotgun aiming, and as easy as that. Your eye will naturally and subconsciously attend to the centering every time. It is then that this combination of sights becomes the most accurate and fastest of all iron sights.

Any competent gunsmith can place these two sights on your "store" rifle for you. I say *competent* gunsmith, because he must know enough to fit a front sight that is high enough so that you can lower your rear sight enough to have your bullets strike the point of aim at 100 yards with any of the varieties of the cartridge that is adapted to your rifle. *The gunsmith cannot sight your rifle in for you.* He can and should bore-sight it, and that means that for you it will almost surely hit within a foot of where you aim it at 50 yards. It is then up to you to adjust the sights so that bullets will hit where you aim, and this is where your marksmanship training comes in. Again, you cannot do anything without fair skill in shooting. Join a rifle club, get a coach, or else a good manual.

A good telescope sight properly mounted on the rifle is more efficient than the Lyman sights, considerably better for varmints, and slightly better for big game, particularly at distances over 150 yards. But the scope is an expensive luxury, and for years we did good shooting with Lyman sights, and we can still use them with fine effect. For example, all my big-game hunting was done with such sights until the hunting scope began to be produced in effective types about 1925. For a few years I used a 30-30 with Lyman sights, and with it I shot 49 head of big game in 56 shots. Only one animal escaped wounded, and I missed but three animals, all at distances over 200 yards. Again, the last season I used a Lyman sighted rifle, a 30-06 Springfield, my bag was one grizzly bear, one moose, one caribou, two rams, and one goat, all at quite long ranges in the Northwest, and all killed with a single shot except that I fired an entirely unnec-

essary second shot into one of the rams.

It is much more difficult to master the selection, adjustment, care, and use of the scope than with Lyman sights, and this, together with their expense, is the only drawback. For effective use on game in woods countries, including quick shooting at moving game, the scope must have a field of view of at least 30 feet at 100 yards, and also good illumination. Until about five years ago the only scopes that had these qualities were those of 2½ power. This advice is now out of date, for in the past five years six most excellent scopes of 4 power have been produced, with all the qualities necessary for effective use in woods or for quick shots, and the optical qualities of these scopes are much superior to the older 2½ powers.

But to show you how necessary it is to study the selection of the scope: For effective use it is necessary that the modern scope be mounted on the rifle so that the eyepiece shall come approximately 2½ inches from your eye when you aim in your normal and steady prone position, and it will then come about 4 inches in front of your eye in the standing position; in either case you will see all, or nearly all, the field of view when you look through the scope. Now the various scopes have their reticule housing placed at slightly different places on the tube, and the bands of the mounting must encircle the tube either in front or in rear of this housing, and finally the base of the mount must be placed in a rather restricted position on the rifle, more or less different for each model of rifle. Therefore, in order to mount the scope properly on the rifle, you must select the make of scope and mount which will permit proper location on your rifle. Some most excellent scopes with some first-rate mounts would be just impossible of proper location on a certain rifle. The scope would be either so far forward, or so far to the rear, that you could not use it effectively. It takes much careful study of all existing scope literature, together with much measurement to determine the proper makes of scope, mount, and rifle that will result in proper location of the scope on the rifle. Unless you know the subject thoroughly, you

should consult an expert. The most expert firm that I know of is Stith Mounts, 500 Transit Tower, San Antonio, Tex. They make many different types of mounts and deal in all makes of scopes, and they know their subject thoroughly. There are many others, of course, but I think Stith is the safest because they will not necessarily try to sell you some one type which might not be a perfect fit. Thus the whole scope problem is a rather intricate one, which cannot be touched on more fully here.

Next, the matter of trigger pull. A more or less perfect trigger squeeze is most essential for good shooting. Poor shots are such because they have not mastered the squeeze to the point where its near perfection is subconscious. Shots at game are hurried shots and you cannot get a good quick squeeze with a trigger that weighs from five to ten pounds or that contains creep. You will simply jerk the shot into the landscape. The pull should be anywhere between 2½ and 4 pounds, and there should be no creep or drag to it. On the applied pressure the sear should release the firing pin like the breaking of a thin glass rod. Here again your competent gunsmith can adjust the pull on your "store" rifle to what it should be.

I regard these matters of correct sights and trigger pull as absolute *musts* on hunting rifles.

### All-Around Rifles

Many writers, all without practical and extended hunting and ballistic experience, have declared that there can be no such thing as an "all-around rifle." Nuts! Certain 25- and 270-caliber rifles make splendid all-around weapons, using the full charged, heavy bullet cartridge for big game, a lighter bullet at high velocity for varmints, and a still lighter pointed bullet at low velocity for small game and small fur bearers.

Take the Savage Model 99 rifle in 250-3000 caliber, the most accurate lever-action rifle made. The factory cartridge is entirely adequate for deer, sheep, caribou, and black bear, and is moreover splendid for wolves, coyotes, jack rabbits, woodchucks, etc. Take the fired case and handload it with an 87-grain pointed bul-