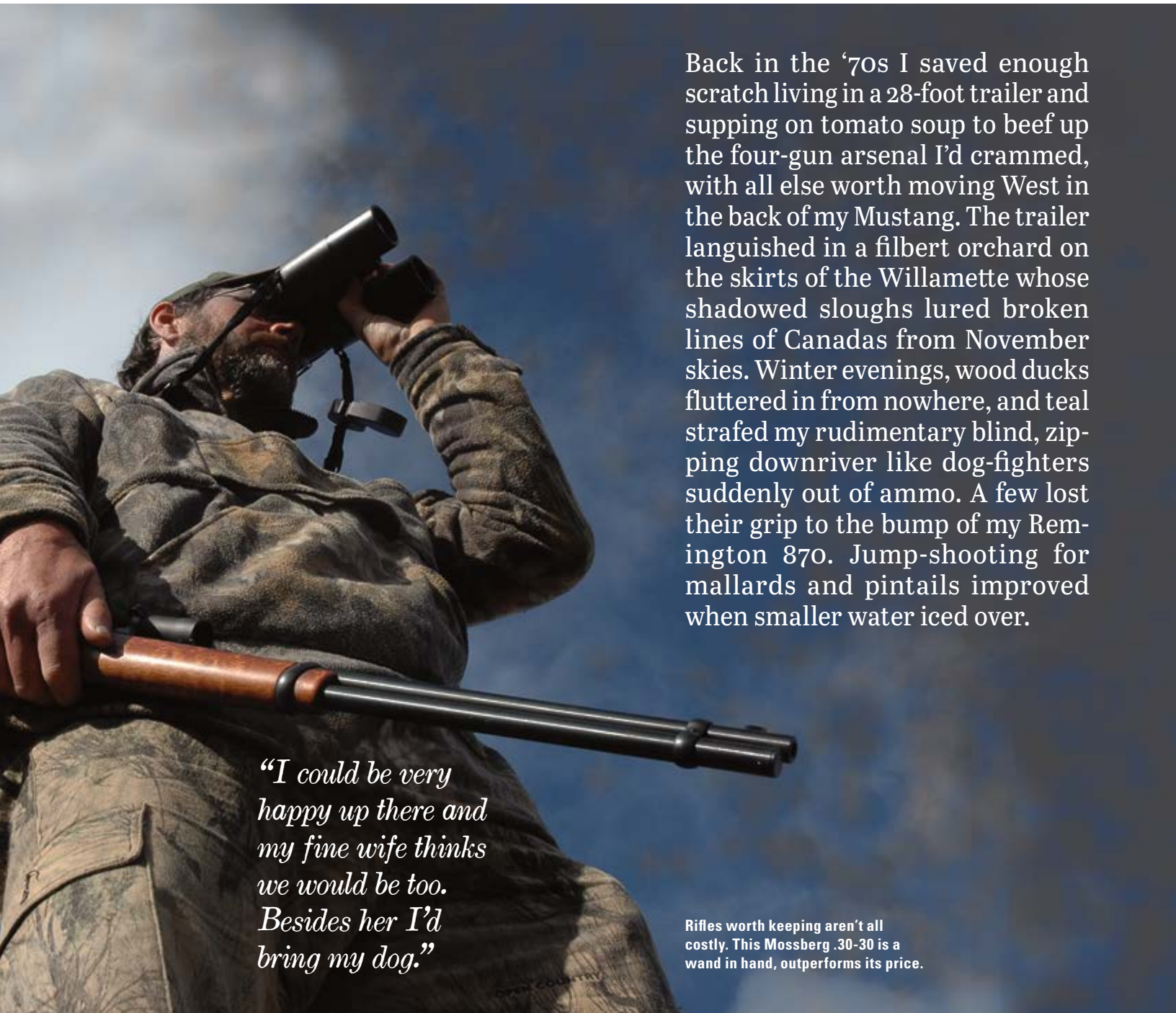


Why We Buy Rifles

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Photos Courtesy of Author



Back in the '70s I saved enough scratch living in a 28-foot trailer and supping on tomato soup to beef up the four-gun arsenal I'd crammed, with all else worth moving West in the back of my Mustang. The trailer languished in a filbert orchard on the skirts of the Willamette whose shadowed sloughs lured broken lines of Canadas from November skies. Winter evenings, wood ducks fluttered in from nowhere, and teal strafed my rudimentary blind, zipping downriver like dog-fighters suddenly out of ammo. A few lost their grip to the bump of my Remington 870. Jump-shooting for mallards and pintails improved when smaller water iced over.

"I could be very happy up there and my fine wife thinks we would be too. Besides her I'd bring my dog."

Rifles worth keeping aren't all costly. This Mossberg .30-30 is a wand in hand, outperforms its price.



On Scottish moors, Wayne shot grouse with this lovely Holland & Holland. He had to leave it there!

Come summer, I prowled river's hem with an iron-sighted Browning BL-22. It drilled a crow for me at an honest 145 steps—and pestered an astonishing population of skunks. "They'll get the quail and duck eggs if we're not vigilant," warned my landlord. To him hunting was a pastime, but he relished my enthusiasm and proudly showed off a shoulder-mounted blacktail with huge antlers. "Got it with this," he handed me a long, octagon-barreled Winchester 1894 with almost no blue and just enough varnish to distinguish the stock from firewood. He'd poached the animal, but given the crude sights and the age of the soft-points I popped from the magazine, I assumed this deer guilty of a capital transgression.

Shortly thereafter I found a table of rifles dating back several decades at a local gun show. The well-dressed fellow tending the lot obviously didn't need the Mark X in my hand. "It's a .264 Magnum," I stammered. There was nothing wrong with the cartridge or the Mauser, but it was on its second stock, the first having walked through the grip, courtesy my failure to ensure lug contact. Also, on its first deer hunt I'd missed four easy shots at a buck that mercifully vanished before I could miss five. I wanted the beautifully crafted .270 that lay between us. "Will you trade?"

Lou didn't need the .270 either. Charitably, he swapped straight across.

I don't miss the .264. I do miss that .270. It left this world when a pal grabbed cartridges in haste and triggered a .308 load that took the rifle apart.

You mustn't get too attached to rifles. If the .270's destruction didn't imbed that caveat, the theft of a truckload of firearms from my home decades later

certainly did. Such losses don't just drain your net worth; they hit you in other ways. Rifles aren't just tools.

One of your rifles might qualify as an heirloom, another as art, and another as a historical treasure. Another may fit you uncannily well or hit when you expect to miss. Surely you have the rifle that downed your first deer. Perhaps another was given you by a friend now gone, another built to order by a talented gun maker. Another may have filled a void in a series. There's probably one that's become a go-to rifle for reasons you've yet to articulate....

"You don't need all those guns," say people who'd as soon you had none. Of course you don't—not in the way you need vitamin C, corrective eyeglasses or a Social Security number. Firearms rank well below indoor plumbing on most lists of must-haves. But to activists whose oxen aren't gored by onerous gun regulation, a firearm has only lethal purpose. There's no value save utility or a price inflated by time, scarcity or the infamy of a dead owner. How myopic! The shooting and hunting industry is hardly fueled by shoppers buying guns as they might tire chains, or storing them as they do the gas grill in the garage.

People acquire and keep firearms for various reasons. Given sales figures, I suspect utility is not the most compelling. Hunting rifles tagged at \$400 can shoot as accurately and cycle as reliably as those costing much more. But expensive models sell briskly, many to hunters already well equipped!

One salient virtue of rifles is their link to other people and places and times.

"Dear Sir, I'll just bet that you think I'm one funny nut for writing you, but so many of your fine friends are my best

friends.... You know Bob Brownell, Thomas Shelhammer, Keith Stegall, Bill Sukalle and Jack O'Connor...."

So began in January, 1948, Wisconsin physician Russell C. Smith's letters to Hosea Sarber, an Alaska game warden and bear guide, gunsmith, and sometime contributor to hunting publications. Smith concluded this name-dropping missive by making plain his dream:

"I'm 43 years of age and for the past 15 years have worked like hell. The past year I've averaged 105 patients daily plus 265 major surgical and 65 minor operations. Now I'd like to [establish a practice in Alaska] where I could hunt big game and fish....I could be very happy up there and my fine wife thinks we would be too. Besides her I'd bring my dog and my technician."

In March, Dr. Smith urged Sarber to visit his home and take full advantage of his 400-yard range. "...Spend all the time you want to with my guns and shoot them...." With no children and a profitable practice, Smith indulged his passion for fine rifles. By 1951 he was sending some to Sarber. In April he wrote of shipping north a Remington 721 in .300 H&H Magnum. "I thought you would like one." Smith had already gifted his idol a 721 and a Winchester Model 70 in .270, and another 70 in .220 Swift. "These are all going to you as presents...." The following March he wrote: "Won't be long before that 23-inch .375 Magnum is in your hands, Hosea...." In July, 1950, he ordered from Winchester a pair of Model 70 target rifles in .220 Swift, "one for you and the other for me."

Sarber evidently stocked some rifles for the physician, but letters I've found are all from Smith.

The last, dated 14 May, 1951,

signaled his imminent departure from Wisconsin: “Dear Pal Hosea.... Last Thursday shipped 19 boxes of rifles via express and the Alaska Steamship Company. Twelve boxes are light but seven [average] 300 pounds or more....”

Despite his adulation for Hosea Sarber and commitment to an Alaska sojourn, Dr. Smith had little interest in piling up big game. “I’m not killing another big brownie unless he is a record.... I’ll shoot him with my camera and movie outfit.”

Some time after the doctor opened an office in Alaska, Hosea Sarber disappeared in the bush. He was never found. Smith’s firearms collection sold in 1972, when his widow Mary decided she no longer wanted to share her Petersburg apartment with 37 dozen rifles, shotguns, and handguns. A fellow servicing the furnace had said he needed easier access, and that the hundreds of boxes of ammunition stacked there would be better stored in another corner.

The .270 that came my way in trade for the .264 was one of Dr. Smith’s 419 firearms. It took my first mule deer. A .300 H&H, bought later from that lot, killed my first elk. Both these Mausers had been stocked by Montana gun-maker Iver Henriksen. So too the rebarreled 98, another .270, that downed the only bighorn ram I’ll shoot in Oregon. As Russell Smith had lived vicariously through Hosea Sarber in another place, I found in those rifles another era. They

brought to life people long dead, adventures never to be relived. Those postwar sportsmen—and others—have since departed in ill-advised trades. Too late I learned that value in firearms has less to do with function than with dreams and memories.

During small-bore matches in the ‘70s I shared the line with a fellow who’d exclaim when a shot strayed: “And they were going in like trained pigs!” Dick fired good scores. More importantly, he was a gentleman as ready to compliment as to beat his competition. A great, round-bellied presence, he laughed through an impish grin that belied his age. Dick was smart. At Boeing in Seattle, his projects included the first moon vehicle—real rocket science. Still he demurred when asked about his pioneering work. “I’m a slave to physics,” he’d grin.

On the range, Dick accepted humbly the wind-driven 9. And when my scores captured two state prone titles, Dick was among the first with congratulations. He enjoyed seeing others succeed. Early on it was clear he hadn’t a self-important bone in his body. Dick was truly modest. On the eve of one match he stepped over to the bench where I was tending my Anschutz. “You’re on the first relay,” he grinned, “me too.” Then, leaning forward, he whispered, “morning air won’t move until the fog lifts, they’ll go in like trained pigs!” And they did.

A couple of years later after another Seattle shoot I joined Dick for lunch at his

home. There was an odd tension in his smile. “I’m peddling some guns,” he said. “Want to look?” The rifles were mid-level in price, ordinary, but well maintained. Dick’s affinity for accurate small-bores was evident. “This one will smash flies,” he said handing me a late-sixties Remington 700 in .22-250. I bought it.

Dick was gone within the year. The next Seattle match seemed eerily silent without his booming laugh. Again on the first relay, I watched my crosswire quiver against dead air as the range officer barked, “Commence firing!” An arc of pigs ghosted with absurd grace through the X-ring. Dick’s .22-250 is still with me. It’s not going anywhere.

I’ve rued my decision to sell the Anschutz 1413 that kept my tallies near the top of the board in college and, later, in open competition. That rifle had cost \$300 new, a staggering sum when tuition put a hole in my pocket that farm wages, at \$2 an hour, couldn’t plug. I’d ponied up more for iron sights, \$125 for a 20x Redfield 3200 scope. Thirty years hence, a similar package would cost 10 times as much. But the rifle’s greatest value lay in memories of matches with people now gone.

Not long ago I spied on a gun show table a Remington 121 .22 pump, at double the price of a new one in the 1960s, when I borrowed a farmer’s to kill barn rats. The Weaver J4 on that rifle introduced me to scopes. I had thrilled to the milky view through its skinny

steel tube! A wad of bills thumbed onto the show table brought me at last, my own 121—a portal to gentler times.

Even damaged rifles can be worth keeping. A .30-30 I was zeroing prone in a meadow was about ready for the hunt when I laid it on the matt to change targets. A pal hopped in his Suburban to set a gong farther out. He drove over the matt and the rifle, narrowly missing my spotting scope. We duct-taped the splintered butt-stock, the zero hadn’t changed. I regret replacing that walnut, wrapped grip and all.

Many moons ago, I spied an ad in *Shotgun News* for a custom-stocked Mauser; I phoned. “Sorry, that’s gone,” was the reply. “But I have an ‘03 Springfield, .30-06 Improved. New bolt and barrel, Canjar trigger; good work.” When he rang off, I wrote a check for that rifle and another like it. Both exceeded expectations. With the first, I slipped through a Wyoming dawn to intercept a bull elk. Antlers winked in the Doug-firs; I knelt and found shoulder in the 3x Leupold. My Partition floored the bull. He struggled to make short steps into heavier cover, where I killed him with a follow-up shot. That long-tined six-point is one of my best bulls, and the last I’ll likely shoot sharing camp with one of my best friends.

Want a .30-06 Improved on Springfield metal? You’ll have to find one elsewhere. ■



LEFT: Refinish the metal and replace the stock and you’ll rob this Winchester 94 carbine of its character!
RIGHT: Wayne killed this buck with a Savage rifle in .243, which now has personal value beyond its utility.



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