

Parkman used a Hawken;
T.R. favored a lever rifle.
These days, bolt guns trump all... Right?

*Winchester's 1886, designed
by John Browning, was
the first truly potent
lever rifle for the West.*



*What matters to most hunters is
satisfaction at hunt's end. You
can't guarantee a kill, but you can
choose your rifle and cartridge!*

The Western Big Game Rifle

By Wayne C. van Zwoll
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Photos courtesy of Author

Last fall I ran into a fellow toting a rifle in .338 Lapua. It had the profile and accoutrements for service in a sniper's nest, including a scope with power enough for astronomy. He seemed over-equipped. Was he?

Hunting is more fun with a favorite rifle. If his is a space gun that costs more than a new kitchen and hurls bullets with 12 times the muzzle energy of a .45 ACP (adaptive carbine platform), bully for him. Send five times the thump of a .30-30 to 200 yards? That's okay too. I'm not the mule packing his iron up the hill.

A couple of miles across that prairie, I'd just shot a buck at 23 paces. My lightweight Ruger in 6.5 Creedmoor had excessive reach, its Trijicon sight at 3x, triple the power I'd needed.

Big game rifles these days—especially in the wide-open West—are getting heavier. Scoped, with bipod and other add-ons, some bring to mind products from International Harvester. I'm a sucker for slim steel, figured walnut, simple scopes and leather slings—rifles nimble in the hand. But the trend is toward heavier artillery, more power in chamber and glass. Hunters seem to be shooting farther, walking less.

Truly, spotting game at distance comes with no imperative to shoot. Even rocket-powered bullets and reticles with a spider-web of intersections can't ensure hits unless you dope wind and arc accurately and hold the rifle still. Then you must press the trigger without disturbing that rifle the least bit. That's not an easy sequence without bench and bag.

Errors matter less when you cut yardage. Close is also where you feel like a hunter, not a shooter.

Gaping landscapes of the West have long challenged riflemen sneaking toward game. You could say the first western hunting rifle hailed from St. Louis. Among tradesmen drawn there to equip trappers and pioneers probing the frontier was gunmaker Jacob Hawkins. In 1822 Jake's brother Samuel shuttered his Ohio gun shop to join him. Changing their surname to the original Dutch "Hawken," they built rifles.

A typical Hawken rifle had a short, stiff, octagonal 50-caliber

barrel and weighed 10 pounds. Its halfstock was of maple, without patch box. Flint ignition prevailed until 1840 or so. The Hawken often attached double-set triggers. During the Rendezvous era (two decades) Hawken plains rifles defined the type and earned great favor among frontiersmen. Their celebrity came in part from soft iron barrels that retained bullet lube, so resisted fouling. Slow rifling twist threw patched balls accurately.

Francis Parkman told of using a Hawken to kill a pronghorn at 204 paces and watching another hunter drop a bison at nearly 300. While charge weights typically ran 150 to 215 grains, Hawken were known for handling a wide range of loads. These rifles commonly rode across saddles, which cratered the stocks at the balance point. Parkman noted that horsemen "carry three or four bullets in the mouth; the powder is poured down the muzzle of the piece, the bullet dropped in after it, the stock struck hard upon the pommel of the saddle, (but) should the blow on the pommel fail to send the bullet home, or should the latter, in the act of aiming, start from its place and roll toward the muzzle, the gun would probably burst."

The Hawken remained popular long after the advent of repeaters. In 1862, German immigrant J.P. Gemmer bought the business. Samuel Hawken outlived Bridger, Carson and other famous customers. He died in 1884, age 92. Gemmer closed the shop in 1915 and died four years later.

As self-contained cartridges emerged, dropping-block Sharps rifles and the Remington Rolling Block replaced the Hawken. Young John Browning designed and built two single-shot breech-loaders. One caught the attention of Winchester president Thomas Bennett, who bought all rights. The rifle became Winchester's 1885. Browning next sold Winchester a lever action with sliding vertical lugs. The Model 1886 was stronger than Winchester 1866, 1873 and 1876 lever actions, progeny of the Hunt and the Henry.

The 1886 appeared in many configurations. WCF chamberings included .38-56, .40-65, .40-70, .40-82, .45-70, .45-90. It also came in .50-100-450 and .50-110. In 1902 the .33 Winchester was added, driving 200-grain bullets 2,200 fps. It rode with the 1886 until 1936, when the M71 .348 put both out to pasture.

Theodore Roosevelt liked the 1886. In September 1887, a Deluxe '86 in .45-90 became the fifth special-order rifle delivered to

What magic the magnum?

One fall day in 1949 John Holzwarth and his son were working on their Granby, Colorado, ranch, when suddenly the boy spied a huge bull elk pulling mouthfuls of alfalfa from a haystack. John grabbed his .30-06 and shot the bull. The antlers weathered for a decade before getting scored at 391! Holzwarth could as well have killed that bull with a .270 or a .300 Savage. The '06 has an edge on both. But now even this powerful, versatile round is fending off fast-stepping magnums.

Bullets that add 10 percent to .270 and .30-06 velocities add yards to your reach, but only if you hold in the right place and trigger the rifle without moving it. Shots beyond the practical limit of a .30-06 demand fine marksmanship. The effective range of any bullet matters less than the ability of the rifleman turning it loose. If conditions are tough or the rifle quivers, your reach shrinks dramatically. An accurate rifle firing a bullet with a chalk-line path offers little advantage when circumstances limit your ability to ensure a center hit with the first bullet at 200 yards. Or 50.

Roy Weatherby's fast-stepping .270 Magnum in a synthetic-stocked Mark V got this British Columbia billy.



T.R. (Three months later he would spearhead formation of the Boone and Crockett Club.) This rifle had a 28-inch half-round, half-octagon barrel, a half magazine. The checkered pistol-grip stock wore a shotgun butt. Roosevelt called it his "tennis match rifle," reportedly paid for by winnings on the court. With it he downed more than 100 animals. In 2012, Boone and Crockett's 125th anniversary, Turnbull Manufacturing built two replicas of this exquisite 1886.

Roosevelt soon latched onto a new rifle. Winchester's Model 1895 was the first successful lever gun with a box magazine. Announced in 1896, the '95 came in .30-40 Krag, .38-72-275 and .40-72-330. In 1898 the .303 British came aboard, joined between 1903 and 1908 by the .35 and .405 Winchester, the .30-03 and .30-06. Roosevelt adored the .405, despite its hard recoil. It "did admirably with lions, giraffes, elands and smaller game" on safari. Incidentally, an 1895 in .30-40 Krag was almost surely the rifle John Plute used to kill a Colorado elk that topped Boone and Crockett charts for a century.

The 1895 Winchester antedated Arthur Savages' famous lever action. This hammerless repeater garnered patents in 1892, when Arthur was 35. The first lever rifle with a coil mainspring, it featured an ingenious spool magazine and a buttstock held by a through-bolt. The Model 1895 rifle followed, in .303 Savage. Its 190-grain bullet at over 2,000 fps was a ballistic rock star at the time. W.T. Hornaday wrote of moose hunting "with one of your incomparable .303 rifles. I shot the moose at a distance of 350 yards."

The Savage rifle couldn't accommodate the .30-06 and .405, but was lighter and sleeker than the 1895 Winchester—and outlasted it by six decades! Savage's Model 99 became hugely popular in western game fields. Its flat receiver suits it well to scabbards.

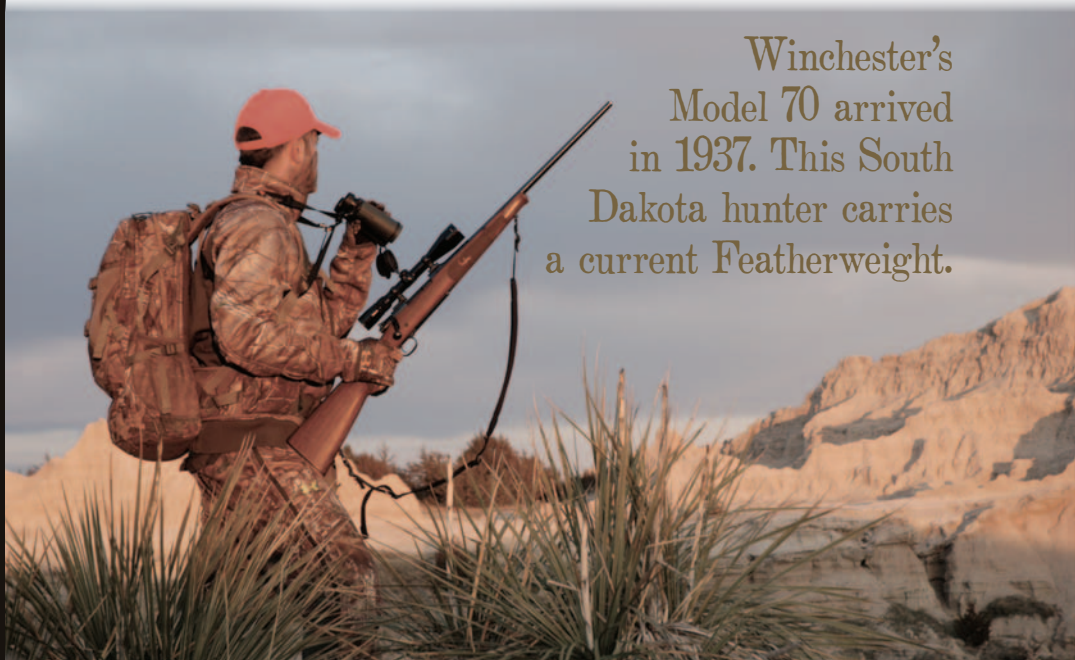
Meanwhile, the Krag-Jorgensen had given way to the 1903 Springfield, the .30-40 Krag yielding to the more potent .30-03—a brief introduction to the .30-06. Subsequently, millions of soldiers learned to shoot with bolt-action rifles. After the world wars, as these and short magazine Lee Enfields and Mausers appeared by the cracker barrel on the surplus market, hunters chopped them to build sporters. In the West, saddle guns would capitulate to rifles with greater reach.

Bolt actions arrived before smokeless powder. Winchester and Remington had them in the early 1880s; but shooters didn't respond. In 1924, still chasing a viable turn-bolt, Winchester fielded the Model 54. It had the Springfield's coned breech, Charles Newton's ejector, Paul Mauser's extractor. The stock borrowed from Sedgely sporters. A nickel-steel barrel bottled pressure from the hot new .270 Winchester. Alas, the Depression eviscerated Winchester; it dissolved in February 1929. Late in '31, Franklin Olin's Western Cartridge Company bought all Winchester assets. Young John Olin kept the 54 alive but delayed its successor, as hunters were still in soup lines. The first Model 70s left the shipping dock early in 1937.

Retailing at that time for \$61.25, this Winchester would become "the rifleman's rifle." Over the next quarter century it proliferated in hunting camps throughout the West. Until its overhaul in 1964, nearly every popular cartridge appeared as a chambering. The long receiver gobbled even the .300 and .375 H&H.

Remington had sketchy success with bolt rifles until 1921, when it introduced the handsome 30S, derived from the 1917 Enfield built for the Great War. The 30S was replaced in 1926 by the 30 Express. This rifle, in .30-06 (also .25, .30, .32 and .35 Remington) cocked on opening. A slim stock and 22-inch barrel

Winchester's Model 70 arrived in 1937. This South Dakota hunter carries a current Featherweight.



kept weight to 7¼ pounds. It sold for \$45.75.

In 1941 Oliver Loomis and A.H. Lowe came up with Remington's Model 720 High Power Rifle, in .30-06, .270 and .257 Roberts. After a production run of just 4,000, Remington shifted focus to military ordnance. After the war, Mike Walker and Homer Young handed Remington a less costly alternative. The 721 and short-action 722 arrived in 1948. The recoil lug was a steel washer clamped between the barrel shoulder and a receiver of cylindrical tubing. Twin lugs were brazed to the bolt. A clip-ring extractor and plunger ejector in a recessed face made possible the storied three rings of steel around the case head.

Bored to .270 and .30-06, the 721 listed for \$79.95. The 722 in .257 Roberts and .300 Savage cost \$5 less. Beginning in 1949, the 721 chambered the .300 H&H Magnum. Other popular rounds followed. High grade A and B rifles gave way in 1955 to ADL and BDL designations. The Spartan appearance of the 721/722 prompted a refined version, the Model 725, from Wayne Leek and Charlie Campbell. In 1962 Remington announced a new rifle. The Model 700 borrowed heavily from the 721/722. A trimmed tang, swept bolt handle with checkered knob and alloy (not stamped steel) bottom metal distinguished the 700. The stock had a higher comb for scope use. Mike Walker gave the 700 fast lock time (3.2 milliseconds).

The 700 ADL with pressed point-pattern checkering retailed for \$114.95; the BDL with pressed fleur-de-lis panels, \$139.95. A long list of chamberings included the hot new 7mm Remington Magnum (magnum 700s cost \$15 more). Wyoming outfitter Les Bowman hailed the flat arc and lethal bite of this belted 7, but also its modest recoil. Myriad M700 chamberings have appeared since.

In 1958, Savage Arms added a bolt rifle to its line. Though the Model 99 lever action was selling well, the sea change toward turn bolts was hard to miss. Like Remington's 721/722, Savage's Model 110 was an economical rifle to build. It was initially priced at, yes, \$110.

Far from New England's "Gun Valley," Roy Weatherby opened his first Los Angeles retail store in the wake of WWII. By 1945 he'd developed several fast-stepping wildcat rounds. They were based on the .300 H&H hull blown out to reduce taper and form radiused shoulders. Weatherby built custom rifles for them and hawked their lethal effect at distance. The pressures of Weatherby cartridges and magnums they inspired added steam to the bolt-rifle movement—as did concurrent evolution of sturdy, fog-proof optical sights. Low bolt lift to clear scopes

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soon became requisite, limiting use of raw military actions.

The 1957 introduction of Weatherby's Mark V rifle to handle even bigger cartridges brought an angular look—now signature Weatherby. But other makers have since adopted it. The Mark V also became a status-symbol choice of the celebrities that Weatherby courted with his brilliant marketing. Hunters enamored of the rifle were as readily wooed by its power and reach.

Late to the bolt-action game was Sturm, Ruger's Model 77. Introduced in 1968, this rifle came on the heels of the company's elegant No. 1, a single-shot with the profile of the British Farquharson. The 77 faced stiff competition in Remington's 700 but was well

engineered, attractive, and skillfully marketed. A sequel, the 77 Mk II, appeared in 1989. Two decades later, cosmetic refinements gave us the 77 Hawkeye.

By then magnum chamberings accounted for a huge slice of bolt-rifle sales among all manufacturers.

High-octane cartridges got another boost from wildcatter Rocky Gibbs, who moved to Idaho from California during a March blizzard in 1955 and carved out a 500-yard range on 35 acres near Viola. Gibbs developed a stable of wildcats on the .30-06 hull. Unlike Parker Ackley's "Improved" rounds, the Gibbs cartridges had a shorter neck than the parent case; forming cases required making a false shoulder.



ABOVE: Wayne used Ruger's No. 1 International in .303 to kill this buck at 220 yards. A delightful rifle!

A lightweight, iron-sighted carbine limits shot distance but eases your burden in steep places.



Sign of our times: This H-S Precision .300 with Zeiss scope is a top-of-the line outfit for the West.

Such shenanigans surely caught the eye of Winchester and Remington. When Winchester came to the magnum party, it was with an unlikely dish: the .458 Magnum. Its .30-06-length case made sense, but unless you had elephants in your tomatoes, the 500-grain bullet didn't. Winchester followed with a .338 and a .264 on the same abbreviated .300 H&H case. Alas, the .264 got tagged as a barrel-burner. The .338 had more muscle than most hunters needed, and it kicked hard.

Winchester's .300 arrived in 1963. A response to Remington's belted 7mm, it was slightly longer, with a shorter neck. While this .30 held more powder than Norma's .308 Magnum, then just three years old, .30-06-length actions limited the .300 Winchester's useful capacity by requiring deep bullet seating.

Long, distinguished tenure in the West had given the .30-06 and .270 a huge following, but in the 1970s and '80s many riflemen converted to short-belted magnums. In a 1990 survey I took of 1,000 elk hunters, the 7mm Remington Magnum trumped the .270 in popularity and crowded the .30-06. The .300 Winchester roared to fourth place. Among rifles, the Remington 700 and Winchester 70 finished in a dead heat, Ruger's 77 a strong third. There was no question lever actions had seen their best days. Only three hunters reported using Marlin 336s, just two toted Winchester's iconic 94, eleven favored Savage 99s, but even the 1903 Springfield tallied more!

Boone and Crockett files showing rifles used to take records-class game echo my survey results. Recent tallies show 18 percent of hunters fired a .300 Magnum, 12

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percent a .270, and the .30-06 and 7mm Magnum each figured in 11 percent of the kills. An obvious caveat: B&C lumped all .30 magnums under one heading. The .300 Winchester probably tops that list, but the .300 WSM is increasingly popular. The .300 Weatherby has many fans. Several powerful wildcats are .300 magnums. Yes, the 7mm Remington also shares its slot. The 7mm Weatherby is rare, though, and 7mm wildcats, like the Mashburn, rarer still.

Surprisingly, bows and crossbows took 16 percent of B&C trophies in the Club's 27th Awards Period, but mainly in whitetail, black bear and cougar lists. For western species, most hunters preferred a .300 or 7mm Magnum, a .270, or a .30-06.

Trends in rifles and ammunition are securely linked. Indeed, the question, "Which rifles do you like?" is answered as often with cartridge names! The bolt-action tide shows no sign of receding. Niche rifles like the Ruger No. 1s and early lever actions that warm my heart pop up only occasionally in the West. Despite its billing as "the modern sporting rifle," the AR-15 in its various forms remains a modern sporting rifle. I've noticed few afield, albeit recent sales are truly off the chart. Sized for the .308, it's a heavy rifle. Even .223-scale versions hang awkwardly from your shoulder.

But a hunting rifle is a personal tool. And the most effective pick isn't always the most satisfying. ■

