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Photos Courtesy of Author

# ONLY

*Spared optical glass,  
a rifle is naked,  
intimate. Shots come  
close, life glinting in  
the animal's eye.  
Bully!*

Scabbards prefer open sights to scopes. Carbiners like this Winchester 94 have killed many animals!



Her trail had threaded places that pressed tightly upon him. Fatigue shortened his step; still, his senses held an edge honed by constant threat. Other hunters might have missed the eggs; he did not. They were of a rare bird; he picked them up. In a sandy wash farther on, he stepped clear of a rock, turned and “looked straight into the tigress’s face.” She was eight feet away. In his left hand Jim Corbett still held the eggs. They may have prevented the reaction, he wrote, that would surely have triggered a charge. Slowly he pushed the Mauser across his chest. “My arm was now at full stretch and the weight of the rifle was beginning to tell...” The tigress had not taken her eyes from his. It seemed “that my arm was paralyzed, and that the swing would never be completed...” At last the muzzle covered the beast. Corbett fired. The .275 bullet splintered the cat’s spine and pulped her heart. The Chowgarh tigress had killed 64 people.

ABOVE: This late-production Marlin 1894 is bored to .357 Magnum, a short-range round suited to iron sights. BELOW: Iron sights still make sense for whitetails hunted with shotgun slugs and traditional deer cartridges.



Now owned by Rigby, that rifle shows the scars of hard use by one of the world's most celebrated hunters. I've shouldered it. Reverently. It points with a life-like will; its sights dutifully follow your eye. Glance down the silvered ribbon of barrel.... It comes hot to the hand under India's sun. It gleams dimly, sights lost to the dark over tethered bait coaxing silent death.

These days, rifles are borne like potted plants. Sportsmen grip them with both hands, arms out so tall that scope knobs and jutting bipod legs clear folds of branded camo. When game appears, machinery must be wrestled onto a support that will rein in a recalcitrant reticle. The animal is pulled from afar by strong lenses. Killing—clean or botched—is an effort in assassination.

OK. That's painting with a broad brush, cynicism in the palette. But haven't you ever felt the urge to wrap one paw around the slim waist of a lever rifle and stride into the

forest—or, palm on the barrels of a big-bore double riding your clavicle, part Africa's long grass? Haven't you wanted to slip a carbine into a scabbard, hop aboard a pony and gallop onto the prairie, reins in your teeth? Got a pulse, Pilgrim?

Many shooters think iron sights crude because they date back hundreds of years. But scopes share much of that history. In 1702 German author Johann Zahn describes a scope with a reticle etched on one of the elements. Shortly thereafter, Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, shot with a scope. Hunting sights got more attention than military sights in that day. Excepting the likes of Danish infantry rifles (during the 1600s!), most issued arms were smoothbores without sights. Aim was taken down the barrel, perhaps with the bayonet stud lining up on the target.

When in the mid-19th century bullets replaced balls and buckshot in battle, notched rear sights and blades up front became standard

equipment. The advantages of long-range hits inspired sights that made precise aim possible. By the 1870s British Lee- Metford rifles had sights calibrated to 2,800 yards. On the American frontier, Sharps breechloaders wore folding vernier tang sights. Meanwhile riflemen retired to ranges in the northeastern U.S. to compete in Scheutzen matches. Iron-sighted Ballard, Stevens, Winchester, Maynard, Sharps, and Remington-Hepburn single-shots cut 200-yard groups tight—even by today's standards!

The introduction of smokeless powder in the 1890s hiked bullet speeds and extended reach. The 1892 Krag was fitted with sights adjustable first to 1,900, then 2,000 yards. In 1901, the Buffington-style Krag sight offered an aperture in addition to a V-notch. The 1903 Springfield succeeding the Krag boasted sight calibrations to 2,850 yards. Military sights suddenly offered more precision than the sights standard on

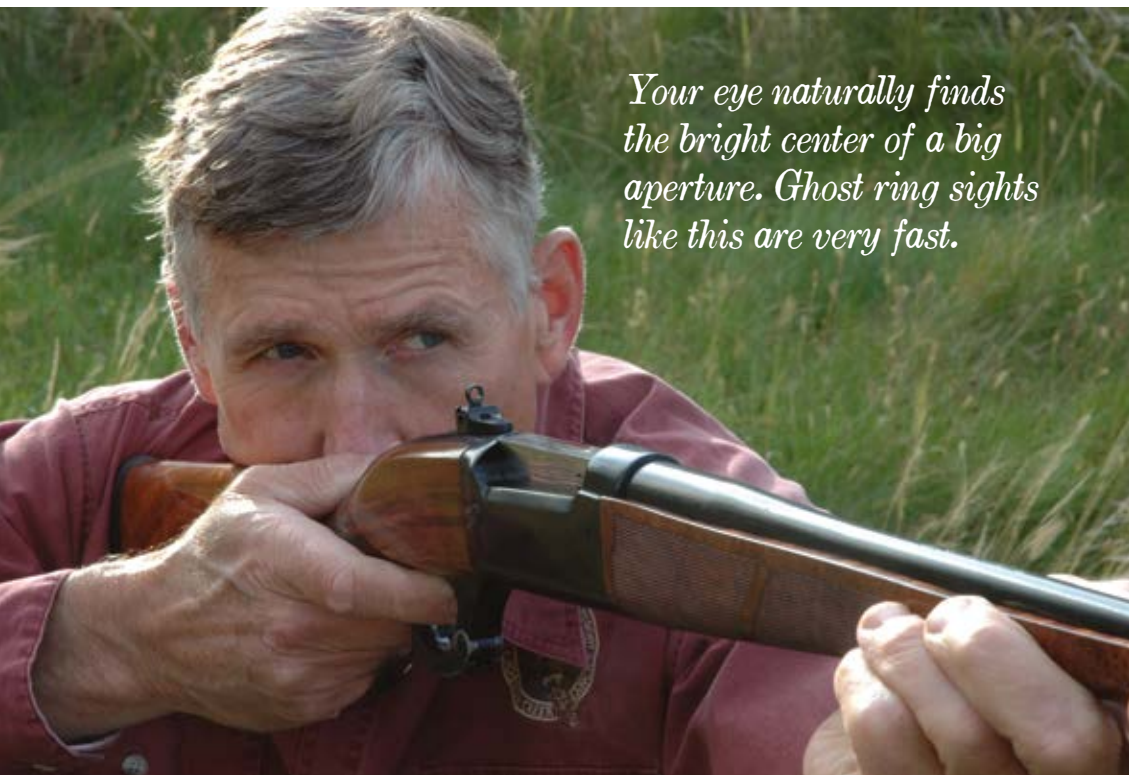


The tang sight on this early Winchester 92 makes hitting easier. A popular option back in the day!

most sporting rifles, reversing the earlier trend.

But superb hunting sights soon appeared. Folding, spring-loaded tang peep (or aperture) sights for lever-action rifles collapsed under the bolt's rearward thrust, then flipped up when the bolt slid home. The stem also folded forward, to protect the shooter's face in recoil. A tang peep is as far from the front sight as is practicable; that long sight radius enhances accuracy. Close to the eye, a tang peep is fast, even with the tiny apertures affording precise aim. Receiver-mounted peep sights are sturdier and don't get in the way of your trigger hand. The bolt peep on Winchester's M71 was neat and effective; ditto Lyman's 1A cocking piece sight for Springfields and the "Little Blue" folding peep threaded onto the back of a Redfield scope base. Bolt sleeve sights with the auspicious tags of Howe-Whelen, Belding-Mull and Marble-Goss were beautifully machined to match the classic lines of Griffin and Howe and Sedgely sporters.

Bill Weaver's 330 scope (\$19, including mount, at its



*Your eye naturally finds the bright center of a big aperture. Ghost ring sights like this are very fast.*



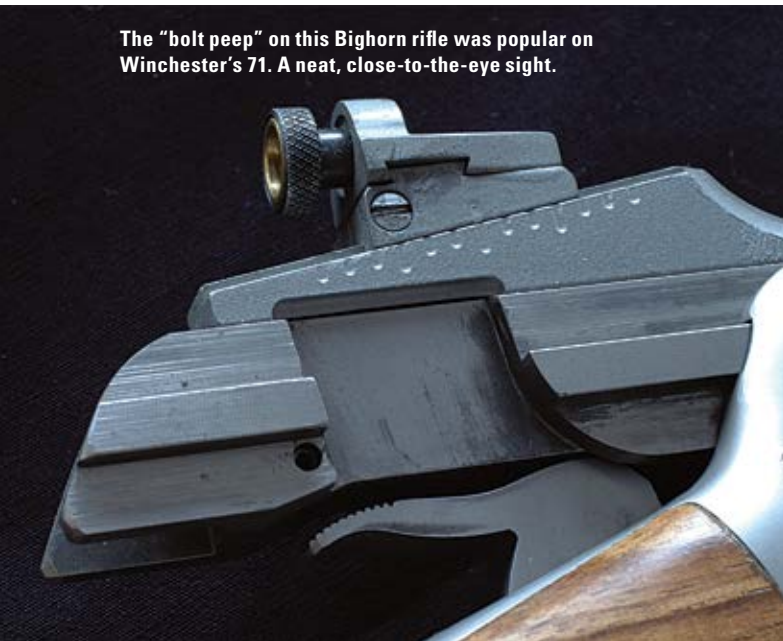
[SITKAGEAR.COM](http://SITKAGEAR.COM)



Williams open sights are adjustable, affordable. Wayne installed one with a shallow V on his SMLE.



The "bolt peep" on this Bighorn rifle was popular on Winchester's 71. A neat, close-to-the-eye sight.



Remington's 81 autoloader was fast and accurate enough for the deer woods with this aperture sight.



1930 introduction) gave shooters of modest means access to an optical sight. Still, even costly scopes in those days were unreliable. Improvements such as fog-proofing, coated lenses, constantly centered reticles, and positive quarter-minute adjustments lay many years in the future. But after WW II, iron sights gradually vanished from bolt-action sporters. Why charge customers for sights they won't use? By the 1970s, "clean" barrels were nudging out those with sights.

Even a scope that doesn't magnify helps you hit. It puts the target in the same apparent plane as the reticle. At dawn and dusk, good optics brighten the target image. Magnification sharpens your view of the sight picture. But iron sights can deliver surprisingly fine accuracy. In rimfire prone competition, it's no trick in calm air to drill .4-inch five-shot groups at 50 yards with irons—a must, indeed, to have any chance of winning! My Anschutz 1413 and Remington 37 have chewed quarter-inch knots in the X-ring. Resulting iron-sight prone scores have often equaled any-sight tallies fired with my 20x scope.

"Aw, c'mon!" you say. But it's true. A flat black bull's-eye centered in a globe front sight in a tiny rear aperture affords very precise aim! Of course, afield such sights are useless; I swap them for fat beads in gaping apertures for quick, easy aim on indistinct targets in dim light, with recoil-proof eye relief.

The unaided human eye can distinguish about a minute of angle (one inch at 100 yards)—and that's if the light is favorable and the image well defined. Front sight and rear sight, the target and background all affect how well you see and how fast and accurately you can aim.

An aperture rear sight

on the receiver (or tang) is easier to use than an open sight, as you needn't see the disk sharply. Your eye naturally seeks the aperture's bright center. The target must be acceptably sharp, if not as crisp as the front sight. Barrel-mounted open sights task your eye with the impossible job of seeing sharp images in three planes. In aperture sights, I like aperture diameter to match rim thickness at 2mm or 3mm, depending on eye relief. Small holes help you aim precisely, but limit field, brightness, and eye relief. Even huge apertures on "ghost ring" sights yield precision enough to kill big game at ordinary distances. My .375 M70 wears a Redfield receiver sight minus its disc. The huge hole is guidance enough.

The deck of a receiver sight for hunting is best uncluttered by knobs. You won't adjust it in the field.

A shallow V is my favorite open-sight design. It's very quick, and more accurate than it looks. A light-colored vertical line, pyramid or diamond can pull your eye to the notch. A variation is a flat-topped leaf with no notch, only that rib. Deep notches, like big sight ears, deny you a clear look at the target.

To my mind, multiple-leaf open sights are bad business. An open-sight zero that sends bullets to the top of a big bead at 100 yards will bring them near bead's center at 200, depending on the load. Shots will strike inside the bead as far as you can aim accurately. A hazard of multiple leaves is their habit of presenting the wrong leaf. Recoil can collapse and erect leaves. Better: one sturdy, drift-adjustable notch.

As for front sights, crisp black blades that appear as flat-topped posts work fine with six-o'clock holds on black bull's-eyes; but they're hard to use on game, especially

against mottled backgrounds and in shadow. Globe sights (open discs inside front tubes) in which you center bull's-eyes are also ill-suited for hunting. My pick for a front sight is a gold or ivory bead. Only snowy backgrounds hide the latter. When ivory beads were real ivory, riflemen removed dirt and discoloration by washing them with grain alcohol and placing them in the sun. Whatever the color, a bead should be concave or flat-faced, and angled up to catch light. Convex beads reflect light toward the sun, showing a false center.

I'm sweet on the Sourdough, a square brass or plastic insert angled up. As wide as its supporting blade, the Sourdough is sturdier than a bead. Precision and complexity exact a cost in durability. Double rifles for royalty in colonial days commonly had a small silver bead for daytime shooting, a flip-up ivory bead for night. Big beads are easy to see, small beads more precise. Barrel length influences proper bead size. On a 22-inch-barrel, a 2mm bead appears about as wide as a deer's chest at 100 yards. Hoods protect beads but also shade them and clutter your

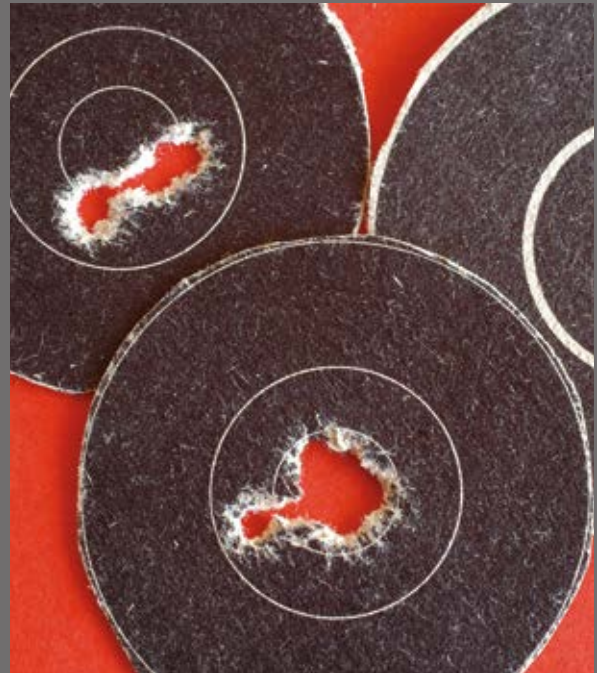
view. The Dockendorff sight of the 1930s featured a hood that opened like an automobile sunroof so you could control light on the sight.

Brownells, the iconic gunsmithing and shooter-supply house, has a phone-book-thick catalog with myriad sights, including those from New England Custom Gun for specially machined receivers like Ruger 77s. NECC has apertures for grooved rimfire rifles, Weaver scope bases and special applications. Another go-to source for irons: Midway USA. Recently, a Montana-based firm, Skinner Sights, has impressed me with excellent sights for a wide range of rifles. They're appearing on Marlin's new custom-shop lever-actions.

More than 45 autumns ago, a whitetail sped past me through Michigan aspens. It somersaulted 90 yards off, over a Williams open sight on a war-surplus SMLE. Years later an Oregon thicket disgorged a blacktail buck. Three fast shots felled him in the open aperture of a Winchester 94. I bet an Alaskan sheep hunt on irons, killing a ram and a bull moose with a 1903 Springfield and its Redfield receiver sight. I'm sweet on

## Targets for iron sights

You can't hit what you can't see, so big targets make sense when zeroing iron sights. You must see target around the bead! At 100 yards, a target 20 inches across is not too broad. D'Arcy Echols, who builds custom rifles and routinely equips big-bores with irons, developed a target for open-sight shooting to 100 yards: It's an inverted T, black on white. Center the intersection, or aim at six-o'clock. His targets measure 15 x 22½, with bars 7½-inches wide. (echolsrifles.com). For aperture sights I prefer black bull's-eyes on manila paper or brown backing. I avoid fluorescent targets and bright white backers. Reflection softens the edges of bead and bull's-eye. Fluorescence in sights or target can burn a sight picture into your eye; if the rifle moves, you can miss that shift.



Iron sights can produce fine accuracy. Wayne fired these 50-yard and 50-meter knots in competition.

Wayne bellied inside 60 yards for a shot with that iron-sighted 99 in .300 Savage. Why shoot far?



*The aperture sight on this reproduction M71 Winchester, now in .348 Improved, yields fine groups!*



# ONLY IRONS

hunting pronghorns with irons. Pushovers with scoped bolt rifles, pronghorns demand that you *hunt* to get a 100-yard chance. Naked rifles in .250, .300 and .303 Savage, .348 Improved and .308 Marlin Express, and 6.5x55 have delivered my most memorable prairie hunts.

In Africa, open sights remain popular on “stopping” rifles. Many visiting sportsmen use scopes. But professional hunters prefer the durability of irons, and their shotgun-quick jab at the buzzer.

Iron sights add sport to a hunt that with glass offers little. Last fall in Namibia, squinting over an open sight on a borrowed Mauser, I sent a 9.3x62 bullet toward a whopping gemsbok bull. Earlier sneaks had been scuttled by fickle winds. Then Jamy and I spied a group feeding away at distance, undisturbed. We sprinted in a long arc and climbed a dune. Prone atop a ridge, we watched the herd string out below. They paused at 130 yards. A bit far for irons. But sling taut, my forward fist on sand, the rifle steadied. At the blast, the great bull slumped. His herd mates dashed off. I cycled the bolt, kept the bead trained. Soon I was stroking 42-inch horns,

most cherished because they'd been taken over irons.

With one day left on that Kalahari hunt, I again took up the Mauser. Dawn's chill still gripped the desert when we spotted four eland bulls ringed by an alarm system of foraging gemsbok. Swinging wide, we came up behind a hillock inside 200 yards—a chip shot for a scoped rifle. The bulls hung tight, as did we. After an interminable wait, the gemsbok drifted off. Singly, the eland climbed a nearby dune. Three eased over the top; the last halting against the sky, a sentinel. When at last that bull vanished, we dashed across the flat and scrambled up the slope. Out of breath, we came upon two of the animals suddenly. “On the left!” hissed Jamy. I fired quickly, twice. The passing of an eland unsettles me—as if the loss of even one of these enigmatic creatures sucks a breath from the bush. I gave thanks.

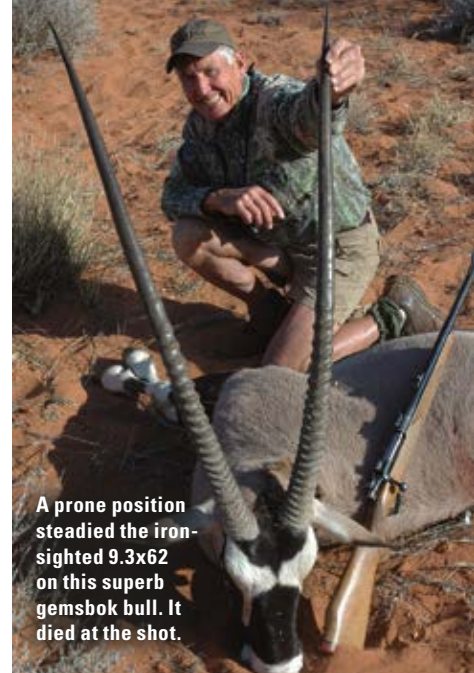
The human eye is remarkably adept at aligning sights. It wants to fix off-center images. Young eyes can best detect and correct fine errors in sight pictures. But if you can see game, you can use irons.

Once, visiting a hunting camp without a rifle, I was invited to use a Mauser in 7x57. Prevailing upon my host to remove the scope, I was dismayed when we found the rear base soldered in place. It hid the rear sight. “I’ll get a hammer,” he said. I restrained him, lest he damage the bridge. At the camp’s rifle

range, I centered the bead over the scope base. Four bullets landed in a 3-inch group at 100 yards—much better accuracy than expected! One stubborn problem: point of impact was a long jack handle above point of aim! Keeping the bead below briskets would prove a mental challenge. But soon thereafter, in a brushy wash, a pig appeared at 60 yards. I dropped prone and aimed at a clump of grass hiding a hoof as the boar faced me. The 160-grain softpoint drove through the brain. So easy, thought I.

My elation proved premature. After battling through dark thickets one day, my host and I chanced upon a fine bushbuck at 40 steps. My 7mm softpoint again clipped its back. “Tough shot,” Andrew said, charitably. I repeated that error on two more animals. Then one evening good fortune returned. A duiker flicked an ear across a wash. With but a sliver of shoulder visible, I braced my arm on a tree, added inches to the long jack handle between bead and brisket—and fired. The tiny antelope dropped, perfectly shot.

I find naked rifles ever more appealing. Nimble as upland guns, they point reflexively. Their iron sights ride snug to the steel, ignoring heat, cold and moisture. They slip eagerly into scabbards. And even when a scope base hides the rear sight, you can wrap your hand around such a rifle and carry it like John Wayne. What’s not to like, Pilgrim? ■



A prone position steadied the iron-sighted 9.3x62 on this superb gemsbok bull. It died at the shot.



Wayne found this Swedish Mauser in a gun shop, used it with iron sights. Yes, that was a cold day!



An open-sighted Savage rifle in .338 Magnum downed this Australian buffalo for Wayne at 27 yards.



A receiver sight keeps this Marlin 1894 slim, quick to point. It's accurate to the reach of .44 bullets.