

Uniquely American, it's otherwise enigmatic, with no brand name. *Millions of hunters own one.*



Deer Rifle!

By Wayne C. van Zwoll
B&C Professional Member
Photos courtesy of Author

To some hunters a rifle is merely hardware, used a week in November. During the off-season, it stands in the closet or behind glass, or fills pegs, or the space behind the pickup seat. Silvered steel and scarred walnut attest to days in rough weather and hostile places. It's still lethal—though a box of ammo lasts years, because none of it gets fired after Thanksgiving.

Then there are hunters to whom deer season is merely an excuse to carry a rifle. Those with only several think themselves deprived. They fire rifles when they don't have to. When a deer shows up, the rifle in hand comes to cheek as naturally as a blink in a dust devil. And the deer usually dies. Hunters in this crowd may or may not insist that rifles have souls.

By the end of the 18th century, the flintlock rifle of the northeast had taken a recognizable shape: the "Kentucky" was long and lean with brass furnishings. Its small bore conserved lead. Oddly enough, its archetype came from Pennsylvania shops run by German immigrants. As settlement pushed past forest with relatively few deer into a wilderness with bigger game and fewer gunsmiths, this long-rifle changed. The Southern rifle hurled heavier balls and wore iron fittings. Its spawn, the Plains rifle, had a shorter, big-bore barrel for easy carry on horseback and lethal hits on bison and grizzlies. During the brief period of the Rendezvous, Ohio brothers Jake and Sam Hawken built the most celebrated of these rifles in their St. Louis shop at the edge of the frontier. But the Hawken and kin remained popular for decades into the era of metallic primers and repeating rifles.

One of those repeaters had the form and function that would define deer rifle.

During the late 1840s Walter Hunt, who also invented the safety pin, developed a lever rifle with a pill-box device to advance primers. A tube under the barrel held a stack of rocket balls—hollow-base bullets with black powder secured in the cavities by paper caps. Gunsmithing by Lewis Jennings, Horace Smith, and Daniel Wesson improved Hunt's Volitional Repeater; B. Tyler Henry refined it. The Henry rifle, proven by Union troops in the Civil War, fathered the Model 1866 that saved Oliver Winchester's New Haven Arms Company from bankruptcy. John M. Browning fashioned a stronger lock-up after his dropping-block single-shot action—and designed for Winchester its 1886, 1892 and 1894 rifles.

TOP: Winchester's 94, the archetypal deer rifle, was built from 1894 to 2006 in New Haven.

LEFT: A 90-year-old Marlin 1893 shot this group, despite a rough bore. Near-minute accuracy!



Marlin's 1893 competed with Winchester's 1894 in the same chamberings. It fathered the 336.



Winchester's 94, first in .32-40 and .38-55, added the smokeless .30-30 and .25-35 in 1895.



The Browning-designed 1886 brought the lock-up featured in Winchester's 1892, 1894.



More potent than the .30-30, the .303 Savage was the first cartridge in the 1895 rifle.

Winchester 1885 cartridge rifles. But a lever-action was slim and lightweight, and delivered a tube-full of firepower at a head-long rate. When Colt chambered its Model 1873 Peacemaker revolver for the .44-40 cartridge Winchester had introduced in its 1873 lever rifle, hunters and homesteaders flocked to buy both.

The advent of smokeless powder in the early 1890s brought new rifles and new cartridges to deer hunters. The .44-40 appeared in the short-action Winchester 1892 and Marlin 1894 lever rifles. In 1895 the .30 WCF (Winchester Center Fire) or .30-30 became our first smokeless sporting round.

Winchester announced its Model 1894 rifle in October that year, in .32-40 and .38-55, both black-powder rounds for Ballard target rifles. The new .30-30 and .25-35 appeared as smokeless chamberings in August 1895, when Winchester first cataloged nickel-steel barrels. The .32 Special joined the roster in 1902. With the .30-30, it long outlived the 1894's original offerings, leaving the line in 1973.

Marlin's 1893 arrived just before Winchester's 1894. It was bored for the same cartridges: .32-40-165 and .38-55-255 (a .375-bore round). Marlin soon added the .30-30 and .32 Special, and the .25-36 Marlin, counterpart to the .25-35 and developed in 1895 by William V. Lowe as the .25-37. The Marlin's solid-top receiver made it more rigid and weatherproof than the Winchester's, and would later become a natural platform for scopes. Model 1893 rifles first retailed for \$13.75. That, brethren, is less than you'll pay now to fill a five-gallon gasoline can for your lawnmower.

By the time Marlin announced its new Model 36 lever-action in 1936, the 1893 and Winchester's 1894 had shed their black-powder rounds. Marlin listed only the .30-30

and .32 Special in the 36. The .32 Special's 170-grain .321 bullet does just what the .30-30's 170-grain .307 or .308 bullet does, aloft and in deer. But some hunters favored the .32. Ed Broder, for instance. On November 25, 1926, he and two pals drove a 1914 Model T 100 miles from Edmonton to Chip Lake, Alberta. They stopped at a sawmill camp to hire a team of horses and a sleigh, reaching the lake cabin in a foot of snow.

Broder grabbed his rifle and, in heavy timber, soon found a large deer track. Trailing for a half mile, he found a fresh bed. The deer could not be far away. "I tracked him into a jackpine swamp. There I found where two moose had crossed. I had to decide between moose and deer." The moose would likely take longer to reel in. Limited daylight remained; Ed chose the deer. He followed with care. Presently, in a clearing, he spied the buck, back to him. "I'd have to take a spine shot. So I waited until the animal raised its head, then pulled up my .32 Special and fired. The buck collapsed. "I thought, *What big antlers!*"

Nearly 80 years later, Ed Broder's Alberta mule deer remains, by Boone and Crockett measure, the World's Record non-typical mule deer.

I recently found a century-old 1893 Marlin in .32 Special. Its special-order features (discontinued after WWI) included a 23-inch half-round, half-octagon barrel over a 2/3 magazine, plus a pistol grip and shotgun butt. It was also a takedown rifle, with quarter-turn, interrupted-thread breeching.

"The bore isn't pretty," conceded the clerk, who obligingly swabbed it for a close look. Outside, the metal had aged gracefully, leaving little blue, but no pits or scars either. Straight-grain walnut showed nary an oil stain or hairline crack. It still mated nicely to the receiver. The wood finish was unmarred and seemed original. Most importantly there was no play in the barrel when cinched snug by hand. I bit on a discount. Later at the range, I thumbed in 165-grain Hornady FTX loads and pasted a fat bullseye at 50 yards. To punch small groups with open-sighted deer rifles, you must make the target big enough to see easily! I like bullseyes three times the bead size as both appear over the barrel. My new Marlin supported by a Caldwell bag, I fired three shots. They drilled a .55-inch triangle—from a bore resembling the inside of a storm drain!

That group is even more satisfying given the conventional wisdom of my youth, which held that .32 Special bores failed rapidly once they lost their edge. Their 1-in-16 rifling shed black powder fouling better than the .30-30's 1-in-12 twist. "But it's barely

adequate to stabilize bullets even when new," said the savants feeding the oil-drum stove. "A .32 Special's like a sheep: just waiting to die. A .30-30 barrel shoots straight until you can't see rifling at all."

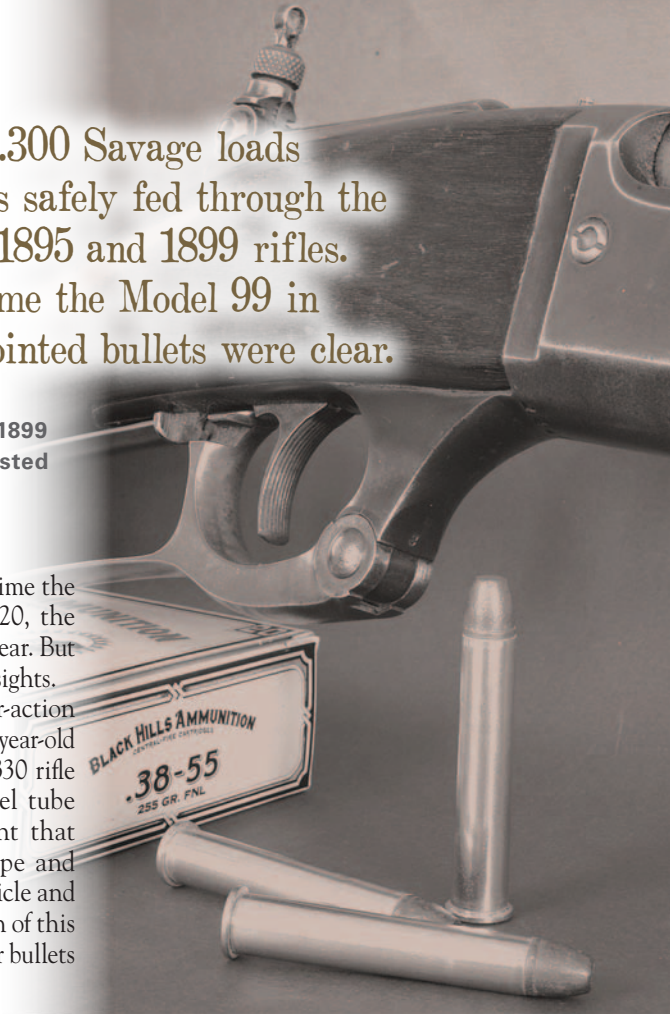
Such sagacity has much in common with many chat-room pronouncements today.

Another fine deer round too soon dismissed was the .303 Savage. It appeared in 1895, a prototype military round for Arthur Savage's brilliantly designed Model 1895 rifle. The .303's 190-grain bullet at 2,100 fps hit harder than its competition and was soon toppling moose and grizzlies in Canada's wilds. In 1899 Savage tweaked his lever rifle, and a year later chambered it to .30 WCF. The .25-35, .32-40 and .38-55 followed in 1903 (in chronology almost in reverse order of the 1893 Marlin and 1894 Winchester). The .303 gave a little ground to the .30-30, more in 1913 to the frisky .250/3000, wildcatted by Charles Newton for lighter, distant game. What killed the .303 was the .300 Savage driving 180-grain bullets at 2,450. Oddly, neither the .303 nor early .300 Savage loads featured the pointed bullets safely fed through the spool magazines of

Neither the .303 nor early .300 Savage loads featured the pointed bullets safely fed through the spool magazines of Model 1895 and 1899 rifles. By the time the 1899 became the Model 99 in 1920, the advantages of pointed bullets were clear.

RIGHT: Savage chambered its 1899 in .38-55 in 1903, years after it listed the rifle in .303 Savage.

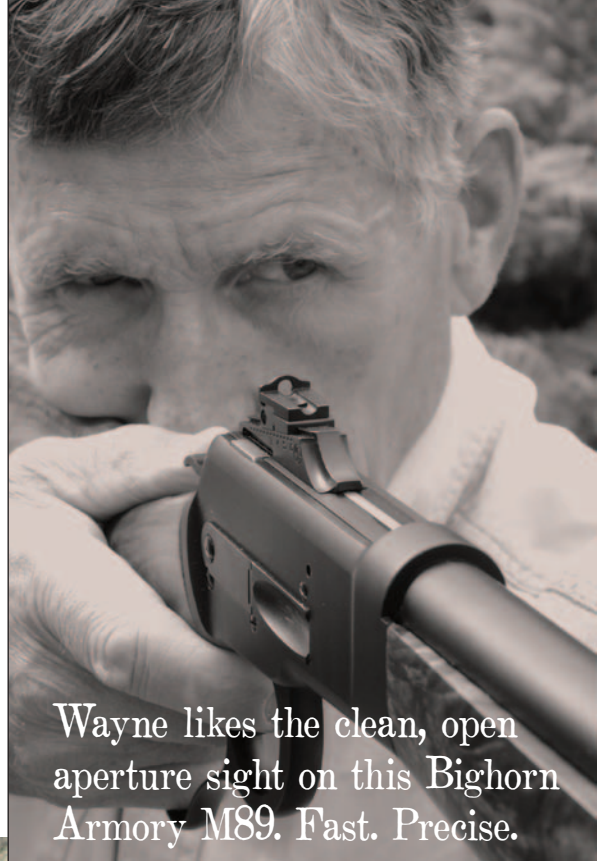
Model 1895 and 1899 rifles. By the time the 1899 became the Model 99 in 1920, the advantages of pointed bullets were clear. But shot distances were capped by iron sights. In 1930 the exposed-hammer, lever-action deer rifle faced a new challenge, as 24-year-old Texan Bill Weaver introduced his 330 rifle scope. The three-quarter-inch steel tube perched in a "grasshopper" mount that resembled a giant paper clip. Scope and mount sold for \$19. A heavy post reticle and dim image limited the effective reach of this 3x. But hunters didn't complain; their bullets were still shaped like bedrolls.



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Wayne likes the clean, open aperture sight on this Bighorn Armory M89. Fast. Precise.

Pointed bullets wouldn't come to lever-actions until Hornady announced LeverEvolution ammo with resilient plastic bullet tips a short decade ago. But riflemen were firing spitzers from bolt rifles as early as 1905, when the Germans adopted a lightweight, pointed bullet for their 8x57 Model 1898s. It clocked 2,880 fps. The U.S. promptly abandoned the 220-grain .30-06 bullet for a pointed 150 at 2,700.

Despite war-time evidence favoring spitzers, .30-06 sporting ammo for Winchester's Model 54 and Remington's 30S sporting rifles featured blunt softpoints. Ditto the 7mm Mauser, also chambered in the 54. Winchester's first pointed bullets for the .270 "ruined too much meat," wailed hunters. Response: a 150-grain round-nose at a subdued 2,575 fps. It didn't sell.

Eventually bullet makers learned to make jackets and noses that wouldn't fragment at impact speeds above 2,000 fps but would upset predictably after the bullet had slowed. Jack O'Connor wrote of firing at a buck three times on one of his early hunts, and calling good hits. The deer ran off. O'Connor lined up on a rock and shattered it with his next round. "Let's find that buck," he told his pal. They did. All three bullets had drilled neat holes without opening.

In 1937 Winchester replaced the 54 with its Model 70. By 1949, bolt-actions like the 70 and new Remington 721/722 were drilled for scope mounts. So too the 99 Savage and 336 Marlin, which

replaced the 36 that year. Leupold had announced its first scope, the Plainsman, in 1947, as Weaver introduced its K-series. Lyman's Alaskan was by then nearly a decade in service. But despite inroads from bolt rifles and cartridges that tapped the potential of optical sights, traditional lever-actions still sold well. In 1953 Marlin added the .35 Remington to its 336 roster, and Winchester presented its *two-millionth* Model 94 to President Dwight D. Eisenhower! In October of that year Ed Stockwell hiked into Arizona's rugged Santa Rita Mountains. He and his partner split at the foot of a ridge, Ed taking the high route. Scrambling up into the rocks, he flushed two Coues' bucks. They topped the ridge instantly and were gone. Ed dashed ahead, but despaired of a shot. The deer had vanished. Turning to descend, he glimpsed movement behind an oak. The biggest buck emerged 60 yards away. Ed fired quickly, killing the deer with his iron-sighted Savage 99. The antlers, he now saw, were huge! Later, they scored over 144—so many inches the Boone and Crockett Club took pains to ensure this was indeed a Coues' buck—and a new World's Record! It still is.

I started hunting deer about a decade later, with a Short Magazine Lee Enfield that cost \$30. The Williams iron sights and a walnut blank from Herters added another \$22 or so. The \$5 Michigan deer licenses seemed a bigger burden, however, when after three seasons I'd killed nothing. One brazen buck had loped obligingly across a pasture, and I'd launched five precious softpoints past the modest antlers. The only consolation: My pal Ron had emptied his 94 Winchester with the same result. Then, near noon on the last day of the 1966 season, a pair of whitetails rocketed through a stand of poplars. I fired at the lead deer, swinging as if it were a partridge and certain my bullet would not find a path through the trees.

To my astonishment, it did. The deer somersaulted 90 yards off.



LEFT: Wayne killed this Wyoming buck at 30 yards with a Savage 99 in .300 Savage, iron sights.

RIGHT: Charles Newton designed the .250/3000 in 1912—the first high-velocity deer cartridge.



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In the rain in a stand of pines, a young buck leaped in front of my muzzle, and fell as fast to what in those days we called a snap shot. Another deer squirted out of a swamp in front of a drive and ran into my second 180-grain Power-Point. Convinced I could shoot more whitetails with a more powerful rifle, I traded the .303 for a Mark X barreled action in .264 Winchester. The Royal Arms stock, of Claro walnut, took the better part of a winter to shape and bed. My first shot split it decisively down the tang, as I'd left wood tighter there than behind the recoil lug. I wept.

Restocked, that rifle did kill a buck. But I missed others. Long and cumbersome, it was ill-suited to catch-as-catch-can hunting. I'd have been better off with the .303, or a lever-action carbine.

At that time a Winchester 94 cost \$89. I envied Ron his—even after The Mistake.... We'd posted Bill on the low corner of a patch of timber. Winding through tangles of wild grapes and honeysuckle was slow going for Ron and me. Rain made it a chore. The woods opened onto a strip of stubble. Struggling over a deadfall, I saw the wink of Bill's pickup beyond the trees. Ron reached the stubble first, unloading the 94 as he neared the Chevy. As the last cartridge fell into his hand, a buck blasted from a tiny swale at his feet. Ron gaped. Bill stepped from behind the truck and dropped the bounding deer neatly. "Best keep 'er loaded till yer done huntin'," he drawled.

Time with bolt rifles has eaten into my hunting with lever guns, though one of my best blacktail deer fell to a borrowed 94 I cycled lickety-split as the buck dashed through, cutting over from one alder patch to the next. Three of my four shots struck; the last drilled vitals. The deer expired a few yards farther on.

The intimacy of shooting fast and close holds much appeal. Not long after the blacktail episode I snatched a Savage 99 from the rack and eased into second-growth conifers raggedly thinned. A whitetail sped away, but slowed as he disappeared. Suspecting other deer, I circled crosswind toward a hump with quiet footing, a better view. A handful of deer sifted through the trees ahead,

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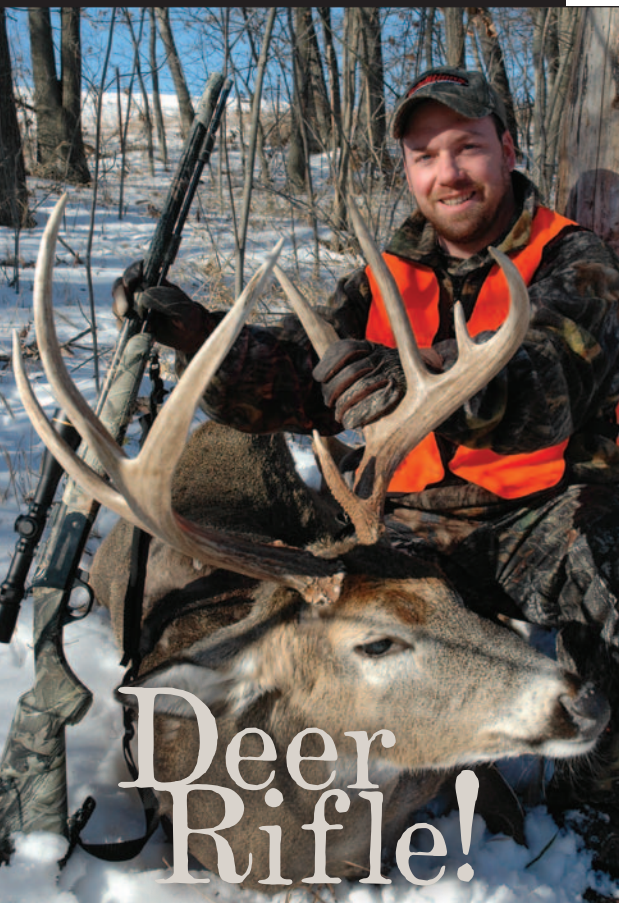


The .30-30 excels on deer,
but new Hornady loads in a
Winchester 94 claimed this bison.



ABOVE: The first scopes, like this Weaver on a Winchester 92, were fragile, heavy, optically dim.

BELOW: Before cartridge rifles, bucks fell to muzzleloaders. This hunter used a modern version.



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feeding. In a short minute, I had the sight pegged to an opening. The buck sunfished at the shot and vanished. I found no blood, but a pea-size bit of pink tissue caught my eye on the second pass. The deer had died in mid-stride after making a hard right-angle turn—a common last act of fatally hit game.

A deer rifle with reach needn't deny you close-cover adventure. Once, still-hunting in a dark rain, I stopped for a snack. A buck eased through the buffaloberry beside me, stopping as he walked into my scent. I killed him with a .280 Improved and a 6x scope at 18 yards. Another time, having watched a buck follow a doe into a patch of willows, I swung wide and approached at nightcrawler pace from downwind. My binocular found the doe's ear, then an eye's glint from the thick lattice behind, I slipped the Model 70 Featherweight to my cheek, steadied the crosswire above that eye. The buck couldn't have heard my .308.

As flat-shooting rifles can fill your tag up close, so lever guns with iron sights suffice in the open. Once, in dawn's cold amber light, I muffed an approach across a Wyoming flat. The mule deer bounced across a great wash, up a hill and onto the horizon. Then, evidently feeling a mile was distance enough, he bedded in tall sage. I backed off and bellied into the wash. Hidden by the curve of the hill I ascended it, then crawled forward, cactus firing my knees. As a coyote might stalk a mouse, I eased ahead until I saw antler tips. They were just 20 steps away. I snaked to where the sage beyond the deer lay open to view, then bounced my foot on the earth. The buck rose, took a step into my Savage's iron sights and collapsed.

Over the years deer rifles have become more powerful. When the short-action Winchester 1892 and Marlin 1894 rifles appeared, chambered for the likes of the .32-20 (a 100-grain bullet at 1,300 fps) and its smokeless spawn, the .25-20 (an 86-grain bullet at 1,450), hunters took them afield. More potent options like the .303 Savage, however, were clearly superior. By war's end in 1918, many shooters had been exposed to the .30-40 Krag and .30-06. They came to favor the .30-30 over lesser rounds. It killed with authority to the limits of iron-sight range but came in carbines that handled like wands. The 1886 Winchester had more muscle in .33 Winchester and .45-70, but whitetails didn't die hard. The 1886 and later 71 in .348 got mighty heavy by day's end.

Still, deer rifles of traditional design have bulked up. In 1965 Marlin

announced its 336 in .444, developed by Thomas Robinson and Arthur Burns from the .30-06 hull. Its 240-grain and later 265-grain bullets carried 1½ tons of energy out the muzzle. A spate of lever rifles in .45-70 followed. Of modern steel, these aren't limited to black-powder pressures. The old military load of a 405-grain bullet at 1,300 fps has been trumped by ammunition that drives 325-grain bullets at 2,000 fps. New .308 and .338 Marlin Express cartridges deliver .308- and .30-06-class moxy from Marlin's 1895.

Winchester added muscle to its Model 94 with the .375 Winchester round in a beefed-up 94 Big Bore in 1978. It hurled a 200-grain bullet at 2,200 fps, a 250 at 1,900. The .307 and .356 Winchester, on the boards in 1980 and introduced three years later, came as close to duplicating the .308 and .358 rounds as was possible in the rear-locking action. From 20-inch carbines, the .307's 180-grain bullet clocks 2,360 fps, the .356's 250-grain 2,050. Add 150 fps for 24-inch barrels.

Compared to such rounds, early deer cartridges are anemic indeed: 117-grain bullets from the .25-36 Marlin at 1,850; 165s from the .32-40 at 1,450; 255s from the .38-55 at 1,300. Verily, those are mild-steel loads, but even 160-grain softpoints in early .30-30 ammo poked along at just 1,960.

These days, with modern loads, even trim, rear-locking lever guns have the punch to down game much tougher than deer. I used a Marlin 336 in .30-30 to take a big Alaskan black bear and two elk, plus a pronghorn. Only one moved more than a few steps: Heart-shot, the bear dashed 50 yards before piling up.

Bolt rifles with more muscle now kill most of the deer taken. Even the slide-action 760 and self-loading 740 and 742 Remingtons popular in Northeast whitetail woods have sold best in .270 and .30-06. Milder rounds with small, quick bullets have become deadlier. Still, the .243 and 6mm, the .250 Savage and .257 Roberts, the 6.5x55 and new 6.5 Creedmoor perform best in bolt-actions. The 99 Savage is no more, and the Browning BL-81, an accurate, front-locking lever rifle, has not charmed deer hunters.

These days you'll find many rifles hawked, directly and obliquely, as deer rifles. But if you want the *feel* of hunting deer before optical sights and fast bullets extended reach, you'll narrow the definition. Pick up a lithe lever gun, or a vintage bolt rifle bored for a 19th-century infantry round. Squint through its aperture sight, or over the notch. Wrap your hand about its waist. Check it, quickly.

Can't put it down? In deer country, you'll be well equipped. ■