

A Tribute to Boone and Crockett Club Honorary Life Member

William B. Ruger

Founder of the Largest U.S. Firearms Manufacturer – Sturm, Ruger & Company, Inc.

Compiled and edited by Mary Webster
B&C Professional Member

Club President Earl Morgenroth writes:

We have lost another giant of industry and conservation with the passing of William (Bill) B. Ruger, our good friend and Boone and Crockett Honorary Life Member. Bill passed away in July at the age of 86.

Since Bill's invitation to become a Regular Member in 1981, he was always enthusiastic about the Club and its programs. Bill's support of the purpose and development of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch during the Club's centennial celebration provided strong impetus to the funding of the Boone and Crockett Chair at the University of Montana. Also, through his Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust, the Boone and Crockett Foundation will receive a significant gift in Bill's name that will add greatly to the Foundation's endowment.

Although Bill was unable to attend Club events in recent years due to his failing health, he was always there in spirit. Over the years, Bill has contributed numerous firearms to help in fund-raising efforts and recruiting of Associates for the Club. He never failed to follow up on correspondence with us, and was always encouraging in his belief about the Club's work. In 1998, Bill was made an Honorary Life Member, the Boone and Crockett Club's second most prestigious honor. Upon notification of this honor, Bill wrote a letter to Club President, Dan Pedrotti, stating that, "I have always been proud of my membership in Boone and Crockett, and felt that I was one of the luckiest of men to be associated with a group I genuinely liked, and which was devoted to the same interests that have stimulated me for a lifetime. Not only that, but Boone and Crockett, over its long history, has acquired immense prestige, initially because of the character of the people who make up the Club. Because of this, you can imagine how impressed I am that the Club has awarded me an honorary life membership. I would not have thought that I deserved it, but in any case, I am deeply grateful for this honor and can assure the Club of my affection, loyalty and support."

It is members like Bill Ruger who have made the Club what it has been in the past, what it is now, and what it will be in the future. We will miss him greatly, and will always appreciate his generosity and kindness. Good-bye, Bill. You were one helluva man, from the same mold as our founder, Theodore Roosevelt.



ABOVE: William B. Ruger and Alexander M. Sturm, circa 1950.

OPPOSITE: Bill Ruger at his home in Croydon, New Hampshire in December 1996.

Bill Ruger, founder of the largest firearms manufacturer in America, was widely recognized as one of the country's greatest gun designers. "Ruger was a true firearms genius who mastered the disciplines of inventing, designing, engineering, manufacturing and marketing better than anyone since Samuel Colt," said R.L. Wilson, firearms historian and Ruger's biographer. "No one in the 20th century so clearly dominated the field, or was so skilled at articulating the unique appeal of quality firearms for legitimate uses."

Mr. Wilson adds that the Ruger legend is all the more remarkable because it spans a period during which America's industrial base was shrinking, and when media and activist pressures against firearms and hunting reached peak levels. Yet even as market shares of other gun manufacturers decreased, Ruger's continued to increase—to the point where, in 1994, it approached 20 percent of the total number of firearms made in the United States. "And the whole phenomena," R.L. Wilson writes, "sprang



*"To ride, shoot straight,
and speak the truth."
William B. Ruger
1916 - 2002*



Ruger felt that Americans deserved a good American-made over and under shotgun. The Red Label and Woodside were the result.

INSET: “You can’t shoot fast, but you can shoot very well,” said Ruger of single-shot rifles. The Ruger No. 1 quickly became a favorite of those who appreciate the graceful lines of a single-shot.



a full-time gun designer for them until the end of World War II.

Bill Ruger’s ambition was to have a firearms company of his own. In 1946, he rented a small, red frame building near the train station in Southport, Connecticut, and began manufacturing parts for Auto-Ordnance and other customers. The company prospered for a while and then went broke. But Ruger had an ace up his sleeve: he had perfected a design for a .22 caliber pistol, and he had developed a friendship with Alexander Sturm, a young man of many talents and family wealth. Alexander Sturm had also married well—his wife’s mother was Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the eldest child of Theodore Roosevelt.

Alexander Sturm’s investment (which actually came from his wife) was small by today’s standards—\$50,000. Ruger received preferred stock and a promise from his new partner that Ruger alone would run the company and that the company would borrow a nickel from anyone. Sturm, Ruger & Company opened for business in 1949, in the same red building in Southport. This time, he applied the lessons he had learned at Auto-Ordnance—the economic wisdom of making do at first with rehabilitated machinery, and staying on the cutting edge of new production technologies to gain an advantage over competitors. With no administrative staff, Ruger was in charge of one or two toolmakers and Sturm designed the enduring “Red Eagle” trademark for their stationary. The two men began production of the .22 caliber pistol, advertised at \$37.50. Orders soon poured in and the business grew substantially, making a profit each year.

In the 1950s, Sturm, Ruger produced a Single-Six revolver, a frontier-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The first factory known as the “little red barn”; the first Ruger .22 pistol on its “salt cod” shipping box; and today’s Ruger .22 pistol on its molded, lockable case.

literally out of nothing . . .”

Born in 1916 in Brooklyn, New York, Bill Ruger spent several of his boyhood years in rural New York state, where he learned to love the outdoors, hunting, and the purposeful beauty of guns. Accompanying his father on many duck hunting trips, Ruger received his own rifle from his father at age 12. Firearms became a consuming interest after that. “I remember seeing them in the store windows and they looked so beautiful, particularly the Savage 99 and the Winchester lever action. The mechanics were so artistically designed—they absolutely thrilled me. I associated them with great adventure and great art,” Ruger recalls.

As a young man, Ruger devoted most of his spare time to reading about

guns, shooting guns, or taking guns apart to learn how they operated. He also frequented machine shops to learn more about mechanics and manufacturing methods. College held little allure for Ruger, and near the end of his sophomore year at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, he married the daughter of a prominent North Carolina family and promptly dropped out of school. He worked for several firearms manufacturers to support his family, but soon quit so he could concentrate on his own gun designs. Ruger knew the Army was looking for a new light machine gun, and worked out of his in-laws’ house to draw a complete concept for an extremely light, compact design. Ruger eventually sold the machine gun to Auto-Ordnance Corporation, and became



Christopher Marchetti

type revolver that resembled the famous "Peacemaker" that Colt manufactured from 1873 to 1940. No one else had thought of reproducing it, but it related well to a growing mystique about the Old West and outdoor traditions that exploded after World War II—the era of Gunsmoke, Wagon Train, and Wyatt Earp. Ruger's revolver used coil springs instead of the delicate flat springs of the Peacemaker, and it was re-proportioned from .45 caliber to use the much less expensive .22 caliber ammunition.

By the end of the decade, Ruger was producing a line of revolvers in addition to the original target pistol. In 1960, the company introduced its first rifle, the Ruger .44 Magnum Carbine. Seven years later, Sturm, Ruger offered the Number One single-shot rifle, one of Bill Ruger's favorite guns. He said of the Number One, "They are a marvelous type of rifle. You can't shoot very fast, but you can shoot very well." In 1968 came the M77, Ruger's classic bolt-action rifle.

Ruger developed many other firearms, including guns for the law enforcement market like the .38 and .357 Magnum revolver, a black powder "cap-and-ball" revolver ("the Old Army"), the Red Label line of handsome shotguns, and many versions of the centerfire rifle. He always kept focused on his unique market—products not only for hunters and target shooters, but for people like himself that bought guns for their aesthetics and precision mechanisms. Ruger also built a foundry that used precision investment casting, instead of rough forging, to form the metal parts of a gun, allowing him to produce particularly advanced actions, like the single shot. Unfortunately, Alexander Sturm never got to see the incredible advances made by the company that bears his name. Sturm died in 1951.

By 1959, the business had outgrown the small red building in Southport, and Sturm, Ruger expanded to new plants and locations, financing its expansion entirely by retained earnings. Over the next several decades, the company continued to introduce four or five new designs or design variations a year, and by 1990, became the only firearms manufacturer to make a complete line of firearms—including rifles, pistols, revolvers, and shotguns—at plants located in the U.S. When Ruger left his factories for rest and relaxation, it was often timed to coincide with the hunting season, where he could enjoy the out-

doors while testing his designs.

In 1990, Sturm, Ruger went public on the New York Stock Exchange. In addition to firearms, the Company also became involved in precision investment casting using titanium, ferrous, and aluminum for a variety of outside customers. In 1994, Ruger began manufacturing heads for the "Big Bertha" line of golf clubs marketed by the Callaway Golf Company. "Ruger Titanium" has become a trademark of quality in the firearms industry and elsewhere. Just ask a golfer.

Even into his eighties, Ruger stayed active in the company. When once asked about retirement, Ruger said with a laugh, "Retire? I've never done a goddamn day's work in my life." The guns and their creation were Bill Ruger's life, and he was good at it—probably the best ever. When not involved with his company, Ruger indulged his lifelong passions, including antique firearms, 19th century Western American art, and his nationally noted antique car collection of more than 30 vehicles, including Bentleys, Rolls-Royces, Bugattis, Stutzes, and a 1913 Mercer Raceabout, among others.

When Bill Ruger started designing and manufacturing guns, he was told he would fail. Colt, Winchester, Smith & Wesson, and Remington were the big four of American gun making. Today, Sturm, Ruger makes more firearms in a single year than all of them, and has produced more than 20 million firearms since the company's inception in 1949—all in Ruger factories located in this country. According to R.L. Wilson, "In the entire 600-year history of firearms, no one has achieved such mastery of the art, craft, science, mechanics, business, tradition, and romance of gun making as has William Batterman Ruger." ■

Special thanks to R.L. Wilson, for permission to reprint portions of his book, and providing a wealth of information about Bill Ruger. The author of more than 30 books, R.L. Wilson wrote the definitive biography of Bill Ruger and the company he founded: *Ruger and His Guns: A History of the Man, the Company, and Their Firearms*. To order a copy of this richly illustrated, 358-page book, please contact R.L. Wilson at his website, wilsonbooks.com, or write to 1730 Kearny St, G-1, San Francisco CA 94133; fax 415-835-5998.

B&C Club Honorary Life Member Jack Parker Remembers Bill Ruger . . .

Those of us who had the great good fortune to have a very close friendship with Bill Ruger recognized him as an ideal and unusual Renaissance Man. Aside from his genius in designing and producing firearms, he read extensively, appreciated and collected books, firearms, art, and vintage automobiles—and he was a history buff. Bill could contribute to an erudite discussion of any number of strange subjects and provide unique insights thereto.

Over some 25 years together, we used up a good deal more than our share of whiskey (it turned out they could make it faster than we could drink it) while working over many hunting ex-

periences and such less important matters ranging from the business climate, gun design, the economy, the conduct of foreign affairs and the perfidy of the media and lawyers, to the evaluation of whiskey and gourmet foods. These were great times in my life, which will be sorely missed but never forgotten. Bill was a great and true friend who made all of us who enjoyed his companionship the better for having done so.

PICTURED ABOVE: Boone and Crockett Club Members Bob Lee, Bill Ruger, and Jack Parker at Bill's office just days before he passed away.



B&C Club Regular Member Larry Bucher Remembers Bill Ruger . . .

Twenty-four years ago I purchased a Ruger bolt-action rifle in .243 caliber for my ten-year-old son's Christmas present. With childish exuberance he took the rifle apart and in the process lost a small part. I had purchased the rifle at Kerr's Sporting Goods in Beverly Hills, a truly fine establishment in the tradition of Abercrombie in New York. The store had a full-time gunsmith on the premises and I asked him to order the missing part. Several months went by, and each time I inquired as to the delivery status, I was told Sturm, Ruger had not sent the part despite repeated requests.

I became suspicious that the part had not been ordered, so I called Sturm, Ruger directly and asked for the Customer Service Department. A man came on the line and after hearing my story, promised to overnight by air the missing rifle part at no cost to me. I was so pleased with his response that I asked for the name of his supervisor so I could write a complimentary letter on his behalf. The man on the other end of the phone laughed and replied, "I am the boss. My name is Bill Ruger."

Taken by surprise, I said, "I apologize for bothering you. I thought I was talking to someone in Customer Service."

He replied, "I am Customer Service." The part arrived the next day.